GODA'S GARLAND OF DEVOTION

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Goda's
Garland of Devotion

An Introduction to

ĀMUKTA MĀLYADA

by KRISHNADEVA RAYA

by

PREMA NANDAKUMAR

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CONTENTS

TO MY PARENTS

...Goda Devi's love,
Vishnuchitta's wisdom...

PREFACE

Of the five great epics in Telugu literature, *Āmukta Mālyada* has the pride of having given the Andhras the inspiring sentence: *Telugu is the best among the nation's languages*. Written by Emperor Krishnadeva Raya, the epic is about the life of Goda Devi whose garland of devotion was accepted by Sri Ranganatha It is verily the saga sublime of the Love Divine.

Composed in the grand style of the classics, *Āmukta Mālyada* savours of the nine rasas. And devotional fervour is the Great Bass that elevates it to the position of a scripture.

A few years ago, I happened to listen to a discourse on poetic appreciation by His Holiness Sri Lakshmana Yateendra of Mumukshu Peetham. He chose the verse of Garuda's flight above the oceans in *Āmukta Mālyada,* and elaborated the architectonic and emotional content of the few lines to describe the sublime poetry of Krishnadeva Raya. Sri Lakshmana Yateendra kept the audience spell-bound. We could almost hear the flap of the large wings, the sounds of the turbulent ocean and the hiss of the knot of serpents deep in the ocean-bed. It then became inevitable for me to make a study of *Āmukta Mālyada*. Aided by the excellent exegesis of Vavilla Ramaswamy Sastrulu, I have spent wonderful hours in communion with this golden poem, widening the horizons of my knowledge of Vaishnava literature.

In the course of my *Āmukta Mālyada* studies, I found that no book on the epic had been published so far in English. With a view to introducing it to the non-Telugu readers, I began writing about it. The results of my endeavour were published as a series of essays in *The Indian Express*, Vijayawada, in 1987. I am grateful to Sri R. Sampath for making this possible.

I claim no wide or deep reading in Telugu literature, and my 'introduction' is not a work of scholarship. All that I have sought to record is my enthusiasm for the eminent devotional epic. The saga of the life and work of the Vaishnava Alwars and Acharyas has helped me greatly to achieve rapport with the Telugu classic.

The Appendix 'Goda Devi: A Lyric Dawn' is offered as my own humble footnote in verse to Krishnadeva Raya's powerfully evocative epic, *Āmukta Mālyada*. My piece in an earlier draft appeared in *Tiruppāvai Festival Souvenir* 1988 of Sri Desika Sabha (Hyderabad-Secunderabad).

In conclusion, it is a privilege to record my gratitude to my parents and my brother, Ambirajan, for their constant encouragement and counsel; to my husband for his never-failing help; to Sri Sribhashyam Appalacharyulu and Sri K. T. L. Narasimhacharyulu for their kind words and generosity of understanding; and to Rajsri Printers for the care, taste and despatch with which they have produced this book.

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14 April 1989

PREMA NANDAKUMAR

1. PREAMBLE

It is certainly astonishing that, with the entire classical heritage at his command—the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata*—and himself a powerful King who made and *lived* history, Krishnadeva Raya should have chosen Goda Devi as the heroine of his epic, *Āmukta Mālyada.* The choice, of course, speaks volumes for the crystalline image of the girl who became a goddess.

History tells us of the glorious days of Krishnadeva Raya's reign, and his great contemporary, Allasani Peddanna, has written about the Raya's generosity of understanding and love of the damozel Poesy. But though we hear of his patronage of eminent Telugu poets, he is not associated with any Tamil poet. All the same, his knowledge of Tamil literature must have been wide and deep. The *Divya Prabhanda* hymns seem to have won his religious and aesthetic heart so completely that two of the hymnologists—Vishnuchitta and Goda Devi—are the central characters in his epic, *Āmukta Mālyada.* Ramanujacharya's Visishtadvaita provides the philosophical background to the tale. In the course of the last five centuries, the epic has become entwined with the Telugu literary consciousness in general and the Vaishnava heart in particular. Come Margasirsa month, and we are immediately transported to Nanda's Gokula, the Pavai Nonbu of the Yadava damsels, Goda Devi's *Tiruppāvai*, and Raya's epic *Āmukta Mālyada.*

The epic opens with a detailed Preamble that pays homage to the various gods and acharyas. The very first verse employs a lovely conceit:

> The pendent of Lakshmi's necklace reflects Him;
> She is seen in the lovely Kausthubha gem.
> Their loving presence within
> Is now imaged outside, as it were,
> Shining through the divine bodies crystal-pure.
> To this Venkateswara, I bow in devotion.

Since the purest form of love (aspiration for the Divine) forms the subject-matter of the epic, it is appropriate that the poet refers to the love-filled hearts of the Lord and Lakshmi. Commentators

have pointed out that the very mention of Lakshmi's necklace (*Sri kamaneeya haara mani chennugan*) is a reference to the theme, which is about the garland of Goda Devi that was accepted and worn by the Lord with pleasure; and that the choice of the *utpalamala* metre for the opening verse is, again, an indication of the central plot.

Next come nobly articulated prayers to Anantha, Garuda, Vishwaksena, Sudarsana, Pānchajanya, Kowmödaki, Sārnga and Nandaki. Himself a soldier of repute, Krishnadeva Raya must have felt specially elated inditing these verses that are associated with guarding the devotees of the Lord. The description of the divine conch was surely inspired by Goda Devi. Thus Krishnadeva Raya:

> As He blew the conch, the bees on the lotus
> Moved in droves towards the Pānchajanya,
> Attracted by the scented breath of the Lord.
> It seemed as if the dark lives of demons
> Ever bogged down in the mud of evil
> Were being drawn away by the Maker;
> Brilliant as the full moon at night,
> This conch gives us all prosperity illimitable.

It may be recalled here that, after dreaming about her wedding with Ranganatha in her *Nāchiyār Tirumozhi*, Goda Devi's first thought was for the Pānchajanya. The conch means music, romance, loveliness, and a constant association with the Lord. Her decad on the divine conch also begins with the scented breath of the Lord, as Krishnadeva Raya's *tadaasya maaruta sugandha:*

> Is camphor as scented? the lotus?
> Or the lips of the Lord? Tell me, white conch.
> I wish to enjoy the Lord's breath
> Which is sweet and scented as well.

This Pānchajanya was born in the sea, nurtured by Asura Panchajana, and wrested from him by Krishna who wished to unleash terror upon the ranks of the demons. It shines like the full moon in autumn, risen from the sea to the top of the Udaya Hill (cf. Krishnadeva Raya's *raaka nisaakara gauradhyuti*). Having gained a firm seat in the Lord's raised hand, the conch spends its time in earnest converse with Him. Besides, it is ever alive due to the breath of the Lord Himself. Does this not make it superior to every other

thing in creation? To be breathing all the time in that stream of Grace! The Pānchajanya is seen resting in the Lord's hand like a white swan on a red lotus. How very, very lucky! No wonder, all the devotees of the Lord are quite jealous of this proximity achieved by a mere ocean-born shell.

Goda Devi has then a brilliant idea. She tells the conch that, as the philosophy of Vaishnavism calls for helping fellow aspirants and approaching the Divine as a group of sadhaks, the conch should help them in this co-operative endeavour to attain divine consciousness. The Margasirsa *vrata* is meant for such a *shivir*, a camp of devotees pitched in human time aspiring for the Lord's Grace. Krishnadeva Raya is certain of the conch's generosity of understanding as a mediator. The Pānchajanya will grant us prosperity illimitable: *kalyāna saakalyamun osangun.*

Before passing on to the context which prompted the creation of the epic *Āmukta Mālyada*, Krishnadeva Raya bows in deep devotion at the feet of the twelve Alwars who indited the hymns of the *Divya Prabhandham*, thereby ushering in a wonderful Hindu renaissance. The bhakti waves generated by the Alwars of Tamil Nadu were to engulf the entire Indian sub-continent, and in the course of several centuries blossom forth as Mira Bai, Kabir, Raidas, Surdas, Tulsidas, Jayadeva, Vidyapati and Guru Nanak. This world of bhakti is totally sattwik. Indeed, we enter the zone of absolute happiness and calm in the world of Alwars' poetry.

As the king contemplates upon the life-giving cool springs of poesy in the *Divya Prabhandham*, he realises that the Alwar-heart is a living temple of Narayana. Has not Nammalwar repeatedly said: "He has come and occupied my heart"? Why has He done so? Krishnadeva Raya has a charming explanation:

> As if to be rid of the heat received
> When living at the centre of the twelve Suns,
> Narayana appears to have chosen
> The hearts of the beloved Alwars
> Which are indeed cool and scented lotuses,
> And are pure through contemplation.
> Desiring for release, I bow to them.

As the twelve Adityas illumine our cosmos, the twelve Alwars illumine the spiritual spaces within us. By retaining the Lord in

their hearts they give Him joy and themselves love in the ecstasy of the Ananda consciousness. Goda Devi refers to this in the sixth verse of *Tiruppāvai*: "As the dawn comes with the twittering of the birds...the rishis and yogis repeat gently the name of Hari whom they hold in their hearts". They repeat His name 'gently' lest He be troubled by noise and wake up with a shock, explains a fond commentator of *Tiruppāvai*! Such is the truth of the Greater Realism which envisions Narayana residing in the Alwars' heart.

The Preamble then moves on to a dramatic moment in historical time: "Sometime ago I had decided to defeat Kalinga in war. Leading my army I spent a few weeks near Vijayawada, in the holy place of Srikakulam where the presiding deity is Andhra Vishnu. Having fasted on the Ekadesi day, I rested in the temple at night. Towards dawn I was vouchsafed a wonderful vision. Darker than the rain-bearing clouds, with eyes that were far more beautiful than lotuses, wearing garments that were a brighter gold colour than that of Garuda's wings, with the Kausthuba gem shining like the early morning sun, accompanied by Lakshmi holding a lotus in one hand and the other promising Grace, Andhra Vishnu appeared smiling and commanded me".

What could such a vision mean for a King who was looking forward to the blood, sweat, toil and tears of a battle? The time was meant for sharpening the sword and straightening the lance. Had the Lord come to advise him on the strategy to be followed? Presently we hear what the Lord has to say. Not a word about assault, counter-attack, or the push of aggression:

> "You have written several works in Sanskrit. Write a poem in Telugu that would please me. Let the theme be my marriage with Goda Devi at Srirangam It was with some distaste that I had received the garland offered to me by the garland-maker in Mathura. By describing the tale of Goda Devi who gave me her garland, you will make me happy".

Could there have been a trace of hesitancy on Krishnadeva Raya's face as he heard the Lord? A King, a well-respected scholar, and a renowned poet: can he 'descend' to write in Telugu? The author of *Madalasa Charitra*, *Satyabhama Parinaya*, *Sakalakatha Sangraha*, *Jnana Chintamani* and *Rasamanjari* to write in Telugu, a 'regional language'! But the Lord goes on:

"Should you wonder *why* write in Telugu, hear me I live in the Telugu land. I am Andhra Vishnu. Have you not spoken in different languages when consorting with kings from different areas? Telugu is the best among the national languages".

These words—*Desa bhāshalandu Telugu lessa*—have become the flag of self-confidence and proper pride for the Telugu nation; and ever since they were uttered by a royal figure in the name of Andhra Vishnu, Telugu literature has never looked back. Incidentally, though Ramanujacharya and later, Varadacharya (the son of Vedanta Desika) were to lay the strong foundations of Vaishnavism in Andhra Pradesh, it was the presence and power of *Āmukta Mālyada* that has given an indispensable edge to the devotion and philosophy propounded by the Vaishnava Alwars and Acharyas. Recreating the glorious days when Vishnuchitta brought up the lovely foundling, and taking us through the recurring drama of a soul pining for union with the Divine in terms of *Kāvyanubhava*, the language of Krishnadeva Raya welds the classical and the romantic to give us a beautiful literary masterpiece.

Before withdrawing, the Lord tells the King that the epic about Goda Devi's marriage with Ranganatha should be dedicated to Sri Venkateswara. This was to make us understand that the various *archa* forms are here to help us increase our devotion by experiencing a personal relationship. Actually they are but different forms of the one Divine, Narayana, and the writing of the epic would assure the King increased prosperity.

Asking a king on the eve of a momentous battle to indite an epic could only mean that everlasting fame for Krishnadeva Raya would come not through the Kalinga victory. Indeed, the glory that was Vijayanagar was reduced to a shambles in one day at Tallikota. But the King had already reared his spiritual kingdom on firm foundations. *Āmukta Mālyada* is with us today, proclaiming the love, humility and poetry that made a King's inner life an enriching journey into light and Ananda.

But then, not all kings are great poets. In fact, kings and poets rule very different territories. Again, rarely is a ruler of *Kāvya sāmrājya* also an emperor of *bhakti samrajya*. Krishnadeva Raya exemplifies this unusual combination. We need not tarry here with

the doubts as to whether Krishnadeva Raya wrote *Āmukta Mālyada*, or whether it was only from the pen of Allasani Peddanna. What matters who wrote the plays of Shakespeare? The plays are the reality: the rest is illusion, as far as the *sahridaya* is concerned. Such too is the significance of the theme of this epic. History associates Krishnadeva Raya with several Vaishnavite temples, and we experience a thrill to learn from the epic more about the soldier who was such a great devotee as well, and in all probability also a great poet.

The second part of the Preamble gives us an account of Krishnadeva Raya's ancestry as well as the splendour of his reign. This was the dynasty that saved many Hindu temples from decimation by Islamic marauders during the 15th-16th centuries. Here an ingenious device is used to overcome the fault of self-praise.

When the vision of Andhra Vishnu withdraws and the Raya wakes up, he decides to consult his courtiers on the significance of the dream. In the morning, he pays his respects to the assembled chieftains, ministers and scholars, and gives an account of the auspicious dream. They are happy and consider the dream (*subha svapna*) a precursor to many good things. The very fact of the Lord appearing in the King's dream signifies a further accession of faith towards Narayana. Again, the command to write an epic means that the King will be blessed with an increase in knowledge. The presence of Lakshmi assures illimitable prosperity for the royal household. The lotus in her hand is a pointer to the King becoming an Emperor. The Lord's reference to the many kings and several languages would bring lasting friendships; and the theme of the 'used garland' promises the King a rare joy in his personal relationships with his Queens. Besides, the Lord had spoken of increased good when the epic was completed: this could only signify blessed parenthood. Considering all this, the King must go ahead with the task of writing the epic.

The courtiers then launch upon an account of the King's ancestry. They begin with the Moon. We hear of the famous kings of the lunar dynasty, Pururavas and his son Turvasu. The latter takes us to the Tuluva dynasty which could boast of kings like Timmadeva Raya, Eswaradeva Raya and Narasimharaju. Narasimharaja's second wife, Nagamma, was the mother of Krishnadeva Raya.

Vijayanagar itself is said to have been founded in 1336 by Harihara and Bukka. After a series of usurpations, the Tuluva dynasty came to the throne, thanks to Narasa Nayaka whose son Vira Narasimha of "unequalled prowess" (*apāra mahima*) was succeeded by a half-brother, Krishnadeva Raya, in 1509 History tells us of his many victories: the most famous was his recovery of the fortress of Raichur from Ismail Adil Shah of Bijapur. He had certainly become a legend in his lifetime. Thus Domingos Paes:

> "This king is of medium height, and of fair complexion and good figure, rather fat than thin; he has on his face signs of small-pox. He is the most feared and perfect king that could possibly be, cheerful of disposition and very merry; he is one that seeks to honour foreigners, and receives them kindly, asking about all their affairs whatever their conditions may be. He is a great ruler and a man of much justice, but subject to sudden fits of rage, and this is his title: Crisnarao Macacao, King of Kings, lord of the greater lords of India, lord of the three seas and of the land".[1]

Though romantic tangles have been occasionally used to tie up his name in colourful contexts, Krishnadeva Raya has left behind a fair name in personal life as well. Vincent Smith quotes from the Archaeological Survey of India for 1908–'9 to underline this aspect: "...his imposing personal appearance, his genial look and polite conversation which distinguished a pure and dignified life, his love for literature and religion, and his solicitude for the welfare of his people; and above all, the most fabulous wealth that he conferred as endowments on temples and Brahmans, mark him out indeed as the greatest of the South Indian monarchs".

Thus the glowing references to the King's reign in the epic do not sound hollow. Here was a King who incarnated the will to rejuvenate Hinduism. That was the time when even any passive acceptance of the Muslim ascendency would have proved fatal. The courtiers therefore speak of the achievements of the King in defeating powerful rulers like Adil Shah. But, then, Raya was equally great as a writer. *A sāhiti samaraangana saarvabhouma* like

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1. *Quoted in Vincent Smith*, The Oxford History of India (1958), p. 307.

him must follow the command of the Lord and take up the story of Goda Devi's wedding.

Having thus gained the approval of the respected courtiers, the King begins the epic poem with a reference to the Lord's Grace which could save one even when still in the womb. The King needs an abundance of grace to pilot him through this seemingly impossible task. He cannot depend upon the familiar story lines and standard descriptions handed down by the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* traditions. Writing a full-fledged *prabhandah* on a Brahmin garland-maker and his teenage daughter was not going to be an easy task. An epic must embody all the *rasas*. It must be splashed with colour, and made to ring with the sounds of war. People and places had to be larger than life. Overdoing philosophy or devotional poetry could turn the poem into a theological tract or an extended hymn. The Andhra Vishnu had wished for a poem on the lines of classics like *Madalasa Charitra*. Could it be achieved?

A hero of the battle field, Krishnadeva Raya was also a hero of the spirit. He takes up the challenge cheerfully, and the next moment we are in Srivillipputtur, the place where Goda Devi was born.

2. VISHNUCHITTA

In the 8th century A.D., Villipputtur had reached the apex of its glory. The temple of Vatapatrasāyi, built by the chieftain Villi, was the centre of the town's prosperity. But it was not material prosperity that made the city famous. The residents knew how to cultivate *sreyas* as well, and the very air vibrated with devotion to Narayana. Women going about their daily tasks (as when carrying water pots on their hips) walked reciting musically the hymns of the Alwars (*divya prabhandha yugaasayal dravidaanganan*).

Though the author has to follow epic conventions when describing the prosperity and people of the land which includes the courtesans, he walks warily and avoids overt descriptions, for in a story of Goda Devi these things have no place. Instead, there is plenty of nature description. This is verily the kingdom of Sakhambari: jackfruit ripening at the foot of the tree, bunches of plantains heady-scented champaks· a variety of trees like arecanut and mango makes the place a paradise for spiritual aspirants. The drums of the temple, the scent of the sacred basil, the bells atop the Dhwajasthamba: verily these are of the kingdom of God! Everything speaks of the sweetness of human nature. For instance, women who guard paddy set out to dry are so gentle that they use lotus garlands to drive away the deer that come to eat the corn.

The Villipputtur citizenry are fine hosts. They serve the Lord's devotees with rice, dal, ghee, vegetables, milk and curd, for such is the Vaishnavite way of life. The *Tiruppāvai* speaks highly of community worship, community singing and community feasting (*koodi irundhu kulirndhu*). Vishnuchitta belonged to such a family. Having imbibed the teaching of Vaishnavism, he led a regulated outer life which moved in rhythm with his inner life of divine consciousness. He prepared flower garlands for the presiding deity of Villipputtur, and found great joy in this humble task.

Krishnadeva Raya takes a special pleasure in detailing the variety of dishes that Vishnuchitta offered to his guests. The different seasons brought out appropriate preparations to suit the human body. During rainy days there was an abundance of fried

rice cakes and dried vegetables (*vadiyamulu, varugulu*); hot weather indicated butter-milk soup (*timmanambulu*) and tender mango pickle (*vadapindelu:* a delicacy of Tamil Nadu known as *maavadu*!); winter would mean pepper sauce and steaming rice. Again, Vishnuchitta's reception included oil and *dal* flour for the pilgrims to have a healthy bath in the tank on Saturdays. The feeding of pilgrims went hand in hand with the reading of the Puranas that speak about the incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Day and night one could listen to the recitation of the *Divya Prabhandha* hymns. All told, here was a remote holy township glowing with the pearly light of *sattwa:* Vishnuchitta, the gentle devotee of Narayana, lived here in contentment, at peace with himself.

Traditional accounts speak of Vishnuchitta as the son of Mukundacharya and Padmavati. He was born under the Swati star on an Ekadesi day. Considered as an incarnation of Garuda, it was not just acquired scholarship that made him famous. Rather, like Garuda, he seemed a living image of the Veda, a *jnanin* born. The name 'Vishnuchitta' turned out to be appropriate, as the young man's consciousness was filled with the Divine Presence. He engaged himself in horticulture and laid out a vast garden where he worked, spade in hand. Gathering the flowers he would make lovely garlands and himself take them to the temple where the priest decorated the deity with these honey-spilling garlands.

Living in an atmosphere of delight with the rainbow beauty of nature, Vishnuchitta could envision the Divine as pure Anandamaya, a loveliness past description. This beauty and joy percolated into his poems on Krishna. Effortlessly he walked past space and time to watch the Gokula where Krishna was born. His verses on the childhood, boyhood and youth of Krishna inaugurated a new form (*Pillai-Tamil*) in Tamil literature.

Vishnuchitta begins with the birth of Krishna, which is celebrated by the Yadava ladies with strewing coloured powder and sprinkling curds, milk and ghee. Vishnuchitta is now Yasoda fondling the babe, dressing up his hair, bathing him, feeding him and playing with him. The pranks of Krishna have a divine charm about them that, whatever the mischief, he is ever the victor! He grows up, grazes the cows, plays with the Yadava maids, steals

their clothes, and dances upon the serpent Kaliya. And the flute of Krishna!

As the sounds of Krishna's flute came from the forest, the girls stood silently where they were with bowed heads so as not to miss a single note. Divine damsels found this experience sweeter than their own Gandharva music. Tilottama, Rambha and Urvasi froze in statuesque poses in the midst of the dance. Tumburu, Narada and the Kinnara couples ceased to play their musical instruments, preferring to pay attention to the flute's call. Gandharvas decided not to sing. Even more astonishing was the group of gods who forgot to receive their respective portions in yajnas. Instead, they came gliding to the Yadava homesteads. Krishna stood in the forest, his hands crossing each other and holding the flute, surrounded by birds and cattle self-lost in the vasts of this soulful music:

> The boy, dark like rain-bearing clouds,
> With darker tresses of ringlets framing the darling face
> Like droves of bees encircling a red lotus,
> Played the flute; hearing the music,
> The deer forgot to graze
> And stood still as painted figures.

Such was Vishnuchitta's self-effacing bhakti-yoga. And, suddenly, he was called upon to proceed to Madurai, then the capital of the Pandyan rulers. The second Aswasa of *Āmukta Mālyada* swiftly transports us to the grandeur of the capital city of Madura. Krishnadeva Raya is in his element in picturing the gold-topped fortresses, the snake-filled moat and the abundance of high-rise buildings. Released from the earlier constraints when dealing with Villipputtur, the poet gives free rein to his imagination as he takes up the epic components: the archful maids who sell flowers, the noble elephants of the royal stable, the speeding horses, the heroes of the land. However, for all the abundance, the *bhoga*, there is no falsity, pride, jealousy. For this city of Madura revolves on the pivot of Dharma. The vaishyas gather wealth through honest means and give away most of their earnings to charity. The farmers work ceaselessly to produce mountains of paddy which are used to sustain the holy and the good; and the King himself is an ideal monarch, heroic, well-endowed, charitable, compassionate.

Research scholars have identified this Pandyan King with Vallabhadeva (Ko Nedumaran) and M. Raghava Iyengar assigns Vallabhadeva's reign to 740–767 A.D. Vallabhadeva's grandfather was Ninraseer Nedumaran, a Jain who was converted to Saivism by Jnanasambandhar. There is a tradition that Vallabhadeva was a Saivite too, but he embraced Vaishnavism after listening to Vishnuchitta. It is also possible that Vallabhadeva's Chief Minister, Maaran Kaari, had a hand in this conversion as the latter hailed from Kalakkudi, a neighbouring hamlet of Villipputtur.

In *Āmukta Mālyada* severe summer introduces the Pandyan King to the readers. Krishnadeva Raya's magnificant description of the *Greeshma ritu* is one of the highlights of the epic. The scorching sun-rays make the days blindingly bright, the skins of animals go dry, long days watch pits being dug up on the river bed, drooping lotus creepers appear in the lake, and cranes search for tiny fish in the mud. There are also the welcome aspects of summer. The moonlight is lovely, the nights are cool, a pleasant chill marks the water in the well, jasmines gain a heady scent and oh! how to describe the nectarean tender coconut water! These coconuts are kept buried in sand for a while to make them yield icy milk (*himaantah naarikelaambuvul*). Come summer, and it is the Float festival in the Tirumaliruncholai temple which is near Madura. Pilgrims come to the city in great numbers. One Brahmin among them who performs *sandhya* on the Vaigai river bed, is entertained to dinner by the King's chief priest with bananas, jack fruit, cucumbers, a variety of mangoes and grapes among other things, and goes to take rest on the pial outside a house. There are other travellers there, and they all spend their time reciting the Lord's name and exchanging Puranic lore.

The cool night is an invitation for romance. Vallabhadeva decides to meet his beloved courtesan. On the way he hears some travellers conversing in the dark. A voice recites in clear accents: "Men work for eight months to save what they would need for the four months of the rainy season; they gather during the daytime the requirements for the night; the days of youth are engaged profitably to gain security for old age; so we must gather now what we would need after our life." Such words of good import (*purah hita dharmamu*) were spoken by the pilgrim to his fellow-travellers on the pial. The King heard all this clearly.

As lightning in a dark night, such wisdom makes the King think of the perils on life's path, and how he had been wasting precious time pursuing temporal pleasures. This body is as permanent as a water bubble (*budbudha pratimamu*)! Time, like the ship, carries us across life without our realising any movement when we are seated within. The six emperors (Sagara, Nala, Pururavas, Harischandra, Purukutsa and Karthavirya) ruled the entire earth; where are they now? What happened to the great Kings like Gaja, Prithu, Sasibindu, Rantideva and others?

> "Therefore shall I reject kingly pleasures that are as impermanent as the lightning; I shall no more be a slave to the senses; henceforth my aim will be the happiness Beyond. I shall be on the look out for a Teacher who can show me the way".

After presenting the Brahmin a bag of gold for having helped him take the first step to Moksha, Vallabhadeva returns to the palace.

The very next day the King's courtiers were summoned and the eternal question was placed before them. Which God can assure us Moksha? The King offered a bag of gold coins fresh from the mint, bright like the yellow blossoms of *beerakai* (sponge gourd). Those were the days when no dry secularism was preached in the name of peace. Man needs his religion as a sustenance to the spirit. This need was recognised and various religions co-existed happily enough. The King's query brought forth immediate responses, and the court was confounded: Siva, Shakti, Indra, Agni, Surya, Vighneswara, Chandra and Brahma were all put forward as the Divine Power solely capable of granting Release. At this juncture Krishnadeva Raya abruptly takes us back to Villipputtur.

In the traditional account of the episode we have the chief priest of Vallabhadeva as the catalytic agent who gets Vishnuchitta to Madura. Selva Nambi finds the King depressed in the court and tells him that the time is come to get a healer. "Who can minister unto the sick soul?" asks the King. "The physician will come if we organise a conference of scholars". "But a realised soul may not care to come to the royal court", says the King. "Not so", replies Selva Nambi. "Your devotion and sincerity will draw a

proper response". And so it was decided to send emissaries to important personages and request them to grace the Pandyan court.

The *Guru Parampara Prabhāvam* says that the Lord, Vatapatrasayi, appeared to Vishnuchitta in a dream and commanded him to proceed to Madura and get the prize money. "But the prize money is for the Vedic scholar!" exclaimed the humble devotee. The aim of the conference was of course, not the exhibition of Vedic scholarship, but the decisive indication of the path to Moksha. The Lord assured the garland-maker that everything would be all right, for His Grace would accompany Vishnuchitta. With utter humility Vishnuchitta now got into the pearl-decorated palanquin sent by Vallabhadeva and proceeded to Madura.

Krishnadeva Raya asks on our part for an intense suspension of disbelief while he is dealing with this episode. Reciting the Ashtakshara ('I bow to Narayana') Vishnuchitta offered a garland of flowers and Tulsi to Vatapatrasayi. The Lord then spoke in sublime accents (*udaara madhuroktin*):

> "O wise devotee! Proceed to Madurai immediately. Defeat the leaders of false religions who have gathered in the Pandyan court. Propound my greatness and receive the prize money. The King is sick of this world. Out of compassion make him a devotee of Vishnu".

Vishnuchitta was reluctant. As far as traditional scholarship was concerned, he had been a truant and was practically born blind to such *jnana*. He had spent his life digging and mulching plant beds. His hands had grown rough handling the spade. He had known no work except temple service. He would surely be defeated in that court of scholars who were noted for their oratorical brilliance. His failure would only bring infamy to the Lord.

This brought a smile to the lips of the Lord. He then turned to Lakshmi Devi and said that He would see to Vishnuchitta's victory. "O wise man, should things be done as desired by you? Go to Madura. I shall arrange for your success. I won't have a no from you. I am here to do what is needed." Now at last Vishnuchitta prepared to go. As directed by the Lord, the temple priest gave him a travel allowance (*sambadamu*) and an ancient palanquin. Further, some of the servants of the temple carried on their shoulders

bundles of sweet rice-cakes (*ariselu*) as prasada for the King. Vishnuchitta's wife, Viraja Devi, prepared all that he would need on his way:

> "With great devotion that noble lady prepared pots of ghee, packets of condiments, sweet green-dal balls (*porivilangāyalu*) and other eatables, auspicious rice for the journey (*kshematandulamu*), jaggery and jeera, tamarind, unfried rice-cakes (*pachchi varugu*) and grain freed from husk. The box containing the needed things for worshipping Vishnu was also made ready".

So Vishnuchitta journeys towards Madura accompanied by other Srivaishnavas carrying various things required by custom. As the pilgrims proceed, they do not waste their time discussing politics or other ephemeral subjects. Only the Holy name is their verbal companion:

> "O Lord who can be attained by the ashtanga yoga (*yama, niyama, āsana, praanayama, pratyaahara, dhyaana, dharana, samadhi*); Chief of Brahma and the other Gods; O Supreme whose name relieves us from the tiredness of this life which is a circle of birth and death; annihilator of Mura, destroyer of our sins, Lakshmi's consort, lotus-eyed Srihari; O sickle that cuts away the grass of Ignorance in the mind of devotees; Beloved of Mother Earth, shining with a supra-brilliance that defeats the darkest clouds; one who performed the impossible feat of lifting up the Govardhana Hill; Radha's darling; one who takes interest for the sheer fun of it; Rama who blinded Indra's son in one eye by means of a blade of grass; Lord whose lotus feet walk the shining inner spaces of the hearts of sages like Narada; Narayana who is present everywhere! The sweetness of your Name is realised by Parvati Devi herself."

Among the interesting facts that strike us when reading *Āmukta Mālyada*, mention may be made of its importance in recreating India's social history. The detailed references to gastronomical habits have a quaint charm. Carrying a sweet like 'porivilangāyalu', for instance; this delicacy can withstand a long journey. There is, then, the reference to Venkateswara as "leela pardhoosika"; evidently, five hundred years ago, He was already famous as "vaddi kāsulavādu"! Remembering God every moment of their life with

devotional fervour or playful praise, the Vaishnavites had made prayers a way of life. The harsh Sun above or the dry road below did not affect the pilgrims, for they held the umbrella of hymnology. The *Sahasranāma* and the *Divya Prabhandham* were truely their *gayatri*, for these prayers save those who sings them (*gayantam traayate*).

Krishnadeva Raya's description also warns us that we should not turn pilgrimages into mere pleasure-trips. Increasingly our travels even up the Tirupati Hill have become debased with flippant talk and pointless conversations. Every physical movement in this world of human affairs should be linked to divine consciousness so that our life becomes one continuous pilgrimage towards the Goal. By linking ourselves to our fellow human beings by the golden hoops of *nama-smarana*, by making even chance meetings a satsangha, we would be able to arrive at our destination fresh and happy. That is why the *Tiruppāvai*, which describes such a satsangha, also refers often to singing (*paadi*). This is the first step for Bhakti Yoga, as detailed by Goda Devi when indicating the ritual of the Margasirsa vrata:

"Oh people of the world! Lend your ears
To the code of our ritual.
Singing the glories of the gently-sleeping Lord
Floating on the milky sea;
We will refrain from taking milk or ghee,
Apply no collyrium to our eyes or wear flowers.
No wrongful things will we do or say.
But take our morning bath and do acts of charity
As the best way to life and prosperity".[1]

The third Aswasa of *Āmukta Mālyada* begins with the royal welcome awarded to Vishnuchitta. The debate in the Pandyan court had been going on for quite some time. Different sectarian leaders had been advancing arguments in favour of several gods and goddesses. The guard knew this, and hence he sent the Villipputtur Brahmin straight into the Audience Hall. There was no need for any introduction. The aura about Vishnuchitta was enough. The King, the courtiers and the assembled scholars paid homage to him, and he was escorted to a jewelled chair. After

1. *Translated by R. Bangaruswami.*

listening to the others for a while, Vishnuchitta offered to speak, provided the King would be the judge and this was agreed to. Now Vishnuchitta began his arguments with a gentle smile. And a nation's spiritual history was laid on a new course.

At the outset, Vishnuchitta countered the statements of the other scholars in the fray. There were involved speakers, argumentative scholars and aggressive orators. But Vishnuchitta's kindness of heart, infinite patience and sense of commitment won the day. The Sankhya, Advaita, Lokayata, Jaina, Mimamsa, Bauddha, Charvaka and Vaiseshika doctrines were defeated with appropriate quotations drawn from the Vedas, the Brahma Sutras and other traditional granaries of Brahma-knowledge. Krishnadeva Raya's helpful authority in this passage was Ramanujacharya's exegesis on the Brahma Sutras.

Having silenced the opponents, Vishnuchitta spoke of the unique characteristics of Visishtadvaita which light up for us the Divine as a figure of knowledge and Ananda (*sukha samvit*):

> "In the beginning there was only Narayana. Brahma, Siva, the cosmos, the sun, the moon, the stars, water and fire were not. Narayana then decided, as his leela, to enter the chit and achit to appear as Many: so speaks the Chandogya Upanishad. Besides, it is Narayana who is at the centre of the Sun in Antaraditya Vidya as propounded by the scriptures. The Taittiriya speaks of the all-pervading Brahman which is Narayana. For the Brahman does not stand for any other God".

As proof of Narayana being the all-pervading Divine, Vishnuchitta referred to several important events in man's spiritual past. In days of yore when Parasurama was spreading havoc in the ranks of Kshatriya rulers, Pradhartana gave up his kingdom in disgust He prayed to Indra for Release. Indra appeared and directed him "worship me", meaning "worship Narayana within me". like Vamadeva who had worshipped the Lord as Antaryami. Thus Indra made the King understand how the individual soul is different from the Supreme. Only those who are after worldly effects—dharma, artha, kama—worship Brahma and other gods. Moksha, however, can be granted only by Narayana. Vishnuchitta then began to recount the conversation of Khandikya and Kesidhwaja.

This debate that helped Vishnuchitta to establish the supremacy of Narayana *tattva* in the Pandyan court certainly gave a great fillip to Vaishnavism. Vallabhadeva and his queen, Bhusundari, taught their son Paranthagan Nedunsadayan to revere the Vaishnavas. The edicts refer to him as a 'Parama Vaishnava'. In general, Pandyan kings were Saivite while Pallava kings adhered to Vaishnavism. M. Raghava Iyengar feels that the word "having become" (*taanaagi*) indicates wonder even on the part of the composer of the edict. Vishnuchitta was no doubt the cause of such a conversion in the Pandyan dynasty, and this caused wide wonderment. Again, the Sivaramangalam *sasana* speaks of Nedunsadayan as "one who ever praises his preceptor as per the path limned by Manu", and the preceptor here was certainly Vishnuchitta. It is appropriate that Krishnadeva Raya should choose this seminal event in South Indian religious history for his epic, for he was a staunch believer in Vaishnavism.

That it is Narayana alone who can give Moksha is the firm belief of Vishnuchitta. Krishnadeva Raya found Goda Devi articulating this truth in the very first verse of *Tiruppavai*. Vishnuchitta may have needed the aid of Brahma Sutras, the Taittiriya and Chandogya, and the entire puranic lore to prove Narayana's supremacy. But Goda Devi needs only an innocent, child-like faith, the crystalline faith exhibited by the unlettered, inexperienced little girls of Gokula:

Auspicious with a lustrous moon
Dawns the month of Margazhi.
And so hurry up, you bejewelled girls,
Bright youngsters of wealthy Ayarpadi (Gokula),
Those of you who desire an early morning bath,
For, the son of sharp-speared Nandagopa,
The lion-cub child of pretty-eyed Yasoda,
Incarnation of Lord Narayana
Will be granting us the season's boons
Worthy of the world's approbation.[1]

Narayana*ne*! Narayana *alone* can give Moksha! As the Narayana Sukta affirms:

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1. *Translated by R. Bangaruswami.*

"To Him who is Rita, Truth, Supreme, Purusha; who has a dark complexion shot with yellow; who is Manliness, whose eyes hold the contraries, who is verily imaged as Creation: to Him our homage".

Āmukta Mālyada has several digressions, and the first one is the tale of Kandikya and Kesidhwaja. It is practically a verse translation of the concluding cantos in *Vishnu Purana*. We leave the Pandyan court for the nonce to get back to remote days beyond historical time. Yes, to the days when the Nimi dynasty ruled the land. To this dynasty belonged the cousins Kandikya and Kesidhwaja who waged a fratricidal war in which Kandikya was defeated and had to live in exile in a cottage. The victorious Kesidhwaja began a sacrifice. The sacrificial cow, however, was killed by a tiger. The learned elders told the King that Kandikya alone was capable of spelling out the *Prayaschitta* for meeting such a crisis.

Kesidhwaja went to Kandikya, who was understandably incensed: "Having deprived me of everything, have you now come here like Maricha wearing a deer skin, to deprive me of my life? Beware!" Kesidhwaja then described his dilemma. Kandikya's ministers, however, advised him to kill Kesidhwaja, as the former's wife and children were in great distress due to the cousin's treachery. But Kandikya preferred to listen to his cousin and gave him the right directions to perform the *prayaschitta*. Kesidhwaja did so and completed the sacrifice.

After sending away the priests and guests who had attended the sacrifice, he came to Kandikya to offer *guru dakshina*. Kandikya requested his ministers to advise him. They wanted him to ask for the kingdom. "What an opportune moment to gain immense wealth without a moment's struggle", they said.

Kandikya laughed. "Kesidhawja is a man of wisdom. We should rather ask him for the wealth of knowledge. We belong to Nimi's dynasty. A kingdom is nothing to us". He then requested Kesidhwaja to teach him the truth that would destroy the sorrows of birth. It was not dharma for a Kshatriya to accept a kingdom as charity. Only egoists desire power. Now Kesidhwaja said:

"O sinless brother! I am ruling and performing sacrifices to cross the sea of samsara. The experience of sense-pleasures

destroys the good deeds of the past. We belong to the great Nimi dynasty. Hence wisdom has dawned upon you. The thoughts 'me' and 'mine' are seeds for the tree of Ignorance. Man thinks the body made of five elements is the soul. The *atman* shines independent of the body. Things like house and property are related to the body, not the soul. So too the children. This body made of earth (Prithivi) is covered by drink and food very much as a house with water and mud.

This soul has walked through the road of a thousand births and is covered by the dust of Karma *vasanas*; it is down with a sense of tiredness that is Ignorance. The tiredness will vanish only when the dust is washed away by the warm water of knowledge. Then will he gain Ananda consciousness.

As water when heated gets hot, makes hissing sounds and boils over, the *jiva* gets various qualities like *me* and *mine* due to connection with nature. But the soul is independent, indestructible, I have spoken of the evil effects of Ignorance. Yoga alone can cure the ills".

Kandikya then requested Kesidhwaja to enlighten him about the Yoga. The latter agreed to do so with pleasure:

"One who follows that yoga and reaches the Brahman never returns. If the mind holds on to the senses, it will lead to Ignorance. If the mind keeps apart, Release is certain. The mind should be withdrawn from the senses and made to concentrate upon Brahman. The Brahman itself will then transform the *jeevatma* into a yogi as a magnet transforms the iron; yoga is the act of connecting the mind to the Brahman by conscious effort like self-control".

Further, Kesidhwaja spoke about the various steps in yoga like Brahmacharya, Svādhyaya and Asanas; having controlled one's breath by *prānāyāma* and senses by *pratyahāra*, one should settle the mind in an auspicious state (*subhaasraya*). This *subhaasraya* is the Parabrahman which is realised in two states. The *apara* (lower) state has a body like Hiranyagarbha. The *para* (higher) state is formless. As the aspirant (*yogayuk* or *yunjanana*) cannot concentrate upon the formless which is Pure Knowledge, he should hook his mind to the universal form of Lord Vishnu which is seen every-

where in all things. The element of *avidya* which is indispensable when contemplating upon the *apara* Brahman is present in various grades in plants, birds, cattle, men, gandharvas, gods, Prajapati and Hiranyagarbha. Indeed all these are the images of Vishnu.

There is yet another form of Vishnu that is an ocean of all auspicious qualities. This is the form that acts out the divine drama in terms of incarnations so as to help mankind. Though it is everywhere, it is not affected by karmas, nor is it foiled by anyone. The sadhaka should meditate upon this form that destroys all sins. Vishnu, residing in the heart of a yogi, destroys all sins even like fire and wind when they touch a dry bush. Hence the mind should be ever associated with the auspicious form of Vishnu.

Now comes a breath-taking evocation of the *divya mangala vigraha* of the Lord whose beauty actually defies all description. That is the highest meditation when the mind thinks only of this sublime figure all the time and never turns to another. A knowledge of this divine form removes the Ignorance leading to the division of the human and the divine. Indeed the human becomes the divine, and Narayana and the yogi are one. Both are part of the Ananda consciousness.

Grateful to Kesidhwaja for the teaching of the true path, Kandikya fastened his mind to the form of Vishnu and gained release by one-pointed meditation upon the Lord. Kesidhwaja also reached *Vishnu pada* by holding on single-mindedly to Narayana's name. Such was the appropriate episode chosen by Krishnadeva Raya for proving effortlessly the supremacy of Narayana.

Vishnuchitta had with a firm finality won the day. Krishnadeva Raya writes that, as Vishnuchitta ceased to speak, the bundle of prize money tied at the top of a pole automatically slid down, while the drums in the Beyond resounded, and the gods sprinkled flowers. Vallabhadeva found himself drenched in a sea of devotion and delight. The *tattva-traya* (Chit, Achit, Iswara) had been propounded in crystalline terms and the nature of Iswara had been explained in all its glory by Vishnuchitta through the words of King Kesidhwaja. The whole of one's will and mind had to be turned away from the "discursive divagation natural to them" by fixing them on the Eternal in the auspicious form of Vishnu.

Knowledge of this Anandamaya Supreme and love for Him, together with the will-power to achieve this constant union, mark the basic tenets of Vaishnavism. Such a union leads the *jeevatma*, not into any abstract Nirvana, but to the delight of existence. Sri Aurobindo calls this "the sense of the supreme figure of the intensest Indian religion of love, Sri Krishna, the All-blissful and All-beautiful":

> "We may seek after him passionately and pursue the unseen beloved; but also the lover whom we think not of, may pursue us, may come upon us in the midst of the world and seize on us for his own whether at first we will or no...it is not possible for the tongue of human speech to tell all the utter unity and all the utter variety of the ananda of divine love. Our higher and lower members are both flooded with it, the mind and life no less than the soul: even the physical body takes its share of the joy, feels the touch, is filled in all its limbs, veins, nerves with the flowing wine of the ecstasy, *amrta*. Love and Ananda are the last word of being, the secret of secrets, the mystery of mysteries".[1]

Vishnuchitta was a Poorna Yogi whose very body remembered and reflected Krishna consciousness. The words of wisdom he spoke in the Pandyan court were not dry theological formulations but an experienced, intuitive Truth, as we can gauge from his *Tirumozhi* hymns. The king now honoured Vishnuchitta and the others who had taken part in the debate. They too had a role in this drama, for they stimulated the search for the truth of existence leading to the *Paratattva Nirupana* of Narayana. The treasury was almost emptied and precious stones lay strewn all over the palace because of the abundant giving! Not only the godly men, but the gods, the ancestors, the siddhas and Vidhyadharas too hailed the victory as having transformed the Kali Yuga into a Krita Yuga.

However, Krishnadeva Raya is vividly realistic. He is himself a King presiding over scholarly debates, and has given judgements in the past. He had no doubt watched the emotions reflected on the faces of the victors and the defeated. Therefore, we are told, there were some bad losers who walked out of the palace in

1. *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1955), p. 690.

a huff and hurriedly searched for their sandals and palanquins. The words spoken by friends did not register in their minds. Some went a step further and spoke deprecatingly of the King's judgement in favour of an unknown garland-maker. "Who cares to enter the doorways of such an uncritical King?" Thus they returned home, frustrated egoists all.

The capital city of the Pandyas was decorated colourfully, and Vallabhadeva arranged for a grand procession in which Vishnuchitta was taken on an elephant. Riding the elephant and followed by a royal retinue sent by the King, he began his journey back to Villipputtur. And then:

> Garuda's bright unfolding wings
> Made the skies a blue garment
> Dipped in vermilion; the sweet breeze
> Brought the scent of cream from the Milky Sea.
> A loud noise filled the world.
> Garuda appeared on the horizon.
> The King and others saw Him
> Riding on the Great Bird.

Yes, Vishnuchitta and his retinue were vouchsafed a vision of Vishnu, for is it not said that, where a group of aspirants come together in deep sincerity, the Lord surely descends to join the *sangha?*

Krishnadeva Raya describes the *divya mangala vigraha* with poetic fervour as well as emotional intensity. The Lord's feet were placed on Garuda's hands as if red lotuses had been held up by tender branches twain; His yellow garments reflected the golden hue of the Bird; His pearl necklaces were as crystalline as the hearts of yogis; His *makara*-earrings seemed to have drawn close, as they belonged to the natal home of Lakshmi Devi; swan-white Panchajanya and Sudarshana that seemed to be a circle of dust raised by a cyclone ornamented His shoulders that looked like the branches of Kalpa Vriksha. The thirty-three crores of gods who had come to see Vishnuchitta immediately closed their umbrellas and bowed to Narayana. However, Rakshasas and Paisachas took to their heels frightened by the flap of Garuda's wings. It was like cleaning the paddy when the husk alone flies away with the wind.

The sublimity of the scene is, of course, beyond description, even though all the artful aids of poetic technique are mobilized

by the poet. The music of divine singers like Narada is likened to the buzz of the bees accompanying a rain of flowers. The All-Beautiful is here! exclaims Vishnuchitta to himself. Had he not with his poetic imagination brought up Krishna from his birth? Maternal love seeks to enfold the supernal figure in terms of a guardian charm, lest 'evil eyes' be cast upon his child, his beloved, his everything! Vishnuchitta takes up the small brass bells hanging from the sides of the elephant and, striking them, recites a 'guardian verse' that has since become the opening decad of the *Divya Prabhandham.*

The ten verses of *Tiru-p-pallandu* sung by Vishnuchitta when he had the vision of the Lord after winning the court contest is a *mangalāsāsana* in the style of 'Jaya Vijayi Bhava!' Can a human being dare to bless the divine? But is there any difference in status between the human and the divine, when the reality is but one vast stretch of Ananda consciousness?

> "For many years, and everlasting years, and many thousands of years, and crores of hundreds of thousands of years, let thine red feet's beauty be protected! O Lord of emerald-blue hue who have shoulders that vanquished the wrestlers!"[1]

Vishnuchitta then goes on to 'bless' Lakshmi Devi, and the union of the Lord's devotees; the Sudarshana; and the Panchajanya. To the people around him: "If you wish to be in the Lord's service, join us. If your aim is material benefit, go away. If you wish to join us, hurry and recite loudly the Ashtakshara. You who have decided to be with us, forget all other desires except contemplating upon this vision Divine. I belong to a family that has been in the Lord's service for ten generations. We carry the impress of the victorious Sudarshana. I bow to the Lord who has given me ghee-rich food, servitude, betel leaves, necklace, ear-rings and sandal paste, and raised me to Ananda consciousness. Wearing the garment shed by you, eating your prasada, and decorating ourselves with the flowers used by you, we will fulfil your commands. The moment we announced our servitude to you, our clan has found the Greater Life! O Lord! I shall continue to bless you".

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1. *Translated by K. C. Varadachari.*

Instead of translating these *Pallāndu* verses (as he had done with the two cantos of Vishnu Purana), Krishnadeva Raya indites his own prayer which begins musically: *Jaya Jaya Daanava Daarana Kaarana*. This string of sixteen verses is a Dasavatara Stotra, and gives a proper conclusion to Vishnuchitta's description of Lord Vishnu as the Brahman to be meditated upon by the yogi. The Lord can be seen everywhere: even in a fish or a lion. Whatever the incarnation, the Supreme shines forth as a *divya mangala vigraha* (an image with all auspicious qualities).

The three verses on Matsyavatara (Fish incarnation) refer to Somakasura's theft of the Vedas and the Lord's recovering them. The same incarnation was to save the universe from the Great Flood. As the ocean was being churned during the Kurma (Tortoise) incarnation, pearls, pearl-oysters and conch-shells were getting pulverised making it appear that the Lord was grinding lime to strengthen the foundations of the earth. When the Lord as Varaha (Boar) rose from the nether regions carrying the earth, Mother Nature appeared to be wearing the earth as a nose-ring of gold.

In keeping with the Narasimha (Man-lion) Avatara, the King's description is all blood and horror. And when the Lord tore up the chest of the demon, first the innards appeared white; then came red meat and finally the heart was seen jet-black. It appeared as though Narasimha was releasing the *tejas* of Shiva (white), Brahma (red) and Vishnu (black) from the vicious hold.

The Trivikrama (Vamana-Dwarf) Avatara is ever a great favourite of the Alwars. Krishnadeva Raya treads warily as Bali was an ideal King, an ideal householder and an ideal devotee. His fame is likened to a brilliant light in a house (the universe) full of the darkness of fear for him and the Trivikrama's overwhelming dark form would shine like the zodiac to make it grow pale (*simsumaaramu orayangan pempave vaamana*). A little later an image based on the annual migration of swans following the swan of Parasurama's fame presents a charming poetic conceit.

Was it an advance warning of the destruction of the seven essences (*sapta dhaatuvulu*) in the body of Ravana that Rama gave when his arrow shot through the seven trees? Was it for digging the earth and getting back Sita that Rama incarnated as Balarama

and went about with a plough? And Krishna, the darling of humanity! When the Lord raised the Govardhana Hill, water fell around Him in torrents and reflected His form in a million droplets. It seemed then that Narayana was everywhere and the cows were ensconced in an armour of the Lord's protection. And Narayana Kavacha can guard us as Krishna did for seven days and nights the denizens of Gokula. One is here reminded of the soulful 'Narayana Kavacha Prarambhamu' in the sixth skandha of Pothana's *Bhagavatam*.

Buddha; Kalki. These are but two more of the countless incarnations of Narayana that are meant to help man in his onward march towards Divine consciousness, and it is out of compassion for man that the Divine constricts Himself to the inconvenienc. s of an earthly existence. The Alwars realised this and gave expression to this idea in their hymns. Nammalwar speaks of Narayana who "out of compassion was born mid the dirty human race" (*mana parippodu azhukku maanida jaathiyil thaan pirandhu*) and took the form He liked for destroying the demons. The divine incarnates whenever Dharma fades away from earth, says the Gita too.

As Vishnuchitta remembers the several incarnations of Narayana and is moved to the depths by the Lord's compassion, the vision begins to fade. Before withdrawing, Vishnu instructs Viswakarma to enrich the yogi's homestead at Villipputtur, as Vishnuchitta is sure to spend the entire prize-money to improve the temple of Vatapatrasayi. Such is the *paraspara prema*, mutuality of love, between the Divine and the devotee!

3. YAMUNACHARYA

The Villipputtur citizens welcomed Vishnuchitta amid scenes of great joy. Krishnadeva Raya has a long prose passage that recreates a beautiful dramatic scene. The yogi was given temple honours and taken in a Brahmaratha (a palanquin borne only by brahmins) around the place. A variety of musical instruments was played. The anklet bells of dancing girls kept time to the bells of the elephants and horses in the procession. Princes from surrounding areas had come and now walked with joined palms saluting the scholar. Young men threw fruits at the lovely ladies who looked at them from the corner of their eyes while fiddling with their decorated tresses. Among others in this happy crowd were wandering minstrels, weavers, goldsmiths and traders Shouts, screams, witty exchanges and wise words marked a general sense of supreme elation. After Vishnuchitta worshipped in the temple, he returned home and continued to live as before, making garlands for the Lord, recounting Narayana's glorious deeds and looking after other devotees.

Apart from his adoration of Vishnuchitta and Goda Devi, Krishnadeva Raya appears to have had a special regard for Yamunacharya, also known as Ālavandār, the Acharya who gave a mighty fillip to Vaishnavism. It was at his command that Ramanuja composed his *Sri Bashya*. And the poet brings this digression on Yamunacharya into the Vishnuchitta-Āmukta Mālyada theme in a charming way.

One day Narayana was watching Vishnuchitta walk back home after offering garlands to Vatapatrasayi. He told Lakshmi that Vishnuchitta and Yamunacharya had together nurtured Vaishnavism (*manmathambu*) wonderfully well. On Lakshmi's wishing to know all about Yamunacharya, the Lord began the tale. Incidentally, the poet makes it appear as if Yamuna lived long before Vishnuchitta, though the Acharya was actually the immediate predecessor of Ramanuja. Besides, Krishnadeva Raya has introduced many changes that are not found in the traditional hagiography or historical records.

The Pandyan King of Yamunacharya's time was a fanatic adherent of the Saiva sect. The poet uses this opportunity to mount a scathing attack on Saivite religious leaders who were most of them, he thought, insincere and power-mad. The Pandyan Queen was, however, a devotee of Narayana. She followed the Ekadesi fast with utter sincerity. But as an ideal wife, she was careful not to do anything that would offend her consort.

On an *adesh* from her *ishta-devata* about a young boy who was capable of facing an oratorical contest to prove the supremacy of Narayana, she requested the King to assemble a seminar. He agreed. Yamunacharya reached the court, and before entering the audience hall went round an Aswatha tree in the front invoking its presence as witness to the proceedings. The hall was full of Virasaivas and ardent Saivites with thick tresses or covered with sacred ash and rudraksha garlands.

The King spoke to the boy rather gruffly. "O Brahmachari! You are too young to determine the nature of the Supreme Being. Should you lose the argument, we will tie a linga to your neck. Take care before you begin! I have seen too many Brahmins who have come here on false pretences, and begging for money in a shameless manner". Then, to his Queen: "If the Saivites lose in the debate, I shall give up *vibhuti* and *rudraksha*. I shall accept the stamp of Vishnu's discus (*Murugasmara Chakra ankithudan kaagala vaadan*) from the Brahmachari. If the boy loses, then he and yourself will have to take to Siva *deeksha*." The Queen agreed to the conditions.

Yamunacharya said that he had not come to the court as a beggar (*kadupugootikin itaran*) and did not merit such an indifferent welcome. He had really come as directed by the Lord. He would make four statements. Let them be denied by the scholars of the court, if they dared! He would not ask for any special favours just because he had come here on the Queen's command. In the end, Krishnadeva Raya sums up the entire debate in a single verse, and proclaims Yamunacharya's victory: "Narayana is Supreme! From the Peepul tree in the front came a voice: O "King, what this Brahmachari says is true. As Narayana is the Parabrahman, worship Him".

As the opposition melted away, the King realised the truth

of Being and became a devotee of Vishnu. He celebrated the wedding of his youngest sister with the Brahmin victor, and gave him half his kingdom.

This account is followed by a magnificent description of the rainy and sultry seasons of the year. Krishnadeva Raya's poetic fancy roams all over the earth culling lovely descriptions of man and nature. We also learn that Yamunacharya was an able administrator. We go back to Yamuna's grandfather, Nathamuni, whose son Uyyakondar had a devotee called Manakkal Nambi. Nambi felt that the great Nathamuni's grandson who had shown much promise was now entangled in materialistic affairs. He went to Yamunacharya's palace and drew his attention by sending in a bunch of *alarka* greens (known as *thooduvılai* in Tamil, a favourite dish of Yamuna) for a few days and gained an audience. He then told Nathamuni's grandson: "The treasure left behind for you by your grandfather lies in an island at the centre of Kaveri waters. I can show it to you. It is encircled by a snake". Immediately Yamunacharya went to Srirangam and worshipped Ranganatha reclining on Adisesha. A transformation came over him. He abdicated in favour of his son, and became a sannyasin himself

Krishnadeva Raya has made drastic changes in the traditional account of Yamuna's life Originally the debate took place in a Chola court and the immediate provocation for his challenge was the egoistic pride of the Chola poet laureate, Akkiyazhvan. Nor did Yamuna marry the Pandyan princess, though he did get half the kingdom. Thus the idea of his abdicating in favour of his son is also a new addition in *Āmukta Mālyada*. Actually this device comes in handy for the poet to give a detailed account of royal polity.

Though the Vaishnavite world knows Yamunacharya only as the author of *Stotra Ratna*, *Āmukta Mālyada* makes him an administrative genius. It is of course Krishnadeva Raya speaking, and from the account of 'Yamuna Prabhu Rajaneeti' we learn that there was an immense amount of idealism in the Vijayanagar King. At the same time it is obvious that he had a deep knowledge of the cunning, treachery and corruption that were the inevitable concomitants of the administration, as is evidenced by the several 'warnings' issued in the discourse. However, though a just and an idealist way of life is ever difficult to lead, the King should not be lax in performing his duties to the best of his ability.

It is sad that men from all walks of life have lost their earlier strength. Why talk only about powerless kings? There were days when Agasthya drank ·up the ocean waters, a Viswamitra created a new world, a Vasishta turned back the Brahmastra with his staff! Where now are the Brahmins capable of such *tapas?*

> "Hence try to do your best and leave the rest to Narayana who guards the helpless. If you give up egoism, all your efforts will come to fruition. Follow dharma under all circumstances. By doing so you would fulfil the duties towards the sages, the gods and your ancestors. Praise will come to you from all people".

So ends the story of Yamunacharya as imagined by Krishnadeva Raya who concludes the fourth Aswasa with a benediction to Narayana.

Tradition tells us that, after learning about the identity of Manakkal Nambi who brought him *alarka* greens, Yamunacharya listened to the exposition of the *Gita* by Nambi. After several days, they came to the *charama sloka*: "Abandoning all dharmas, surrender to me alone. I shall free you from all sins. Fear not".

Nambi said that the Lord to whom one should surrender was in Srirangam. Yamunacharya came, saw, and was conquered by Ranganatha. He took up his residence in the holy city. Renowned widely as a yogi and scholar, he became a much respected teacher. Among his several students who made a mark in the history of Vaishnavism were Tirumalai Andan, Maraner Nambi, Tirukkoshtiyur Nambi and Tiruvaranga Perumal Arayar. He also blessed Ramanuja and requested him to strengthen the base of Vaishavism by writing a commentary on the Brahma Sutras and by disseminating the *prabhandhas* of Nammalwar.

Among the writings of Yamunacharya are *Jnana Siddhi*, *Atma Siddhi* and *Iswara Siddhi*, *Gitartha Sangraha*, *Agama Pramana*, *Mahapurusha Nirnaya*, *Chatuh-sloki* and *Stotra Ratna*. The seven hundred verses of the *Gita* are summarised as eighteen slokas in the *Gitartha Sangraha*, which has a preface of four slokas and a postscript of ten slokas. According to Yamunacharya, Karma yoga is doing one's job with sincerity: Jnana yoga is cogitating upon one's *atman:* and Bhakti yoga is meditating upon the Divine Lord (*para bhakti*). In

course of time, the intense aspiration to come face to face with the Divine will be met by the answering grace (*para jnana*). Finally the vision thus perceived will create an overwhelming love to be in the constant presence of the Divine This is *parama bhakti*.

The *Chatuh-sloki* is a sublime address to Lakshmi, detailing the auspicious image of Vishnu. Surrender to the Mother is the only way to attain Release; for Her Grace is ever a part of the Lord's presence. The *Stotra Ratna* has strong affiliations with *Divya Prabhandham*; some of the verses are almost literal translations of the Tamil hymns. In the course of the poem we pass through several beautiful images, and the stotra itself is for us to repeat in a meditative mood and invoke the Grace of the Lord. The sovereignty of Narayana is highlighted in the earlier verses, and the rest exemplify the Parama Bhakti of Yamunacharya.

> "Along with Lakshmi you are seated upon the wise and strong Anantha (*prakrshta vijnana balaika dhamani*) whose form is illumed by the gems imbedded in his hood. He is rightly called Sesha for he is ever in your service as your residence, bed, throne, sandals, garment and umbrella. When would I be vouchsafed this vision again?"[1]

For all the *paratva* of the Lord, for all the seeming distance that separates us from this Paramapada Natha, this Supreme Being, He is yet full of *saulabhya*. He is easily pleased: a handful of fried rice offered by Sudama or a plate of fruits and roots brought by Sabari! Nay, His *saulabhya*, like his *paratva*, is limitless. Just salute Him by bringing together the palms:

> "The physical act of joining the palms in adoration of your feet, performed just once, by any one, at any time, and in any manner whatsoever, instantly eradicates all evils, *in toto*, and keeps on bestowing all kinds of benefits, without fail".

Vedanta Desika who wrote commentaries on *Gitartha Sangraha* and *Stotra Ratna* was inspired by this verse to compose the well-known treatise, *Anjali Vaibhavam*. And it can be readily said that Yamuna's *Chatuh-sloki* and *Stotra Ratna* that highlight the place of Lakshmi in the divine hierarchy unveiled a new chapter in Vaishnavism and gave us incandescent prayers like *Sri Stava* of Kuresa and *Sri Stuti* and *Goda Stuti* of Vedanta Desika.

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1 *Translated by S. Satyamurthy Iyengar.*

4. GODA DEVI

The fifth Aswasa of *Āmukta Mālyada* straightaway announces the coming of Goda Devi. Divine Love was in the air, and Vishnu-chitta walked in self-lost contemplation through his immense garden. Suddenly he saw a babe in a bed of *tulsi* plants near a lake of white lotuses. The female child possessed auspicious limbs and had ruby-red cheeks, palms, feet and lips. For a while he stood wondering, gazing at the babe's soft body, auspicious signs, beauty and brilliance. He exclaimed in wonderment: "The Lord has sent this child to brighten my childless home!"

He took the child home and gave her to his wife. That beloved lady received the gift and was thrilled to the roots. Her breasts overflowed and she fed the baby. As the years passed by, the child grew up into a lovely damsel:

> "Her words became fewer; her tresses were a mass of ringlets; her eyes grew large, and learnt to watch from the corner; her cheeks began to blush; her breasts grew rounded, enhancing the loveliness of her form; her palms and feet wore a red shade; the waist was thin; she became shy and retiring; the navel deepened; childhood felt scorned and made its exit from the youthful body".

Vishnuchitta who had spent all his time envisioning the childhood, boyhood and youth of Krishna was now delighted to watch this divine *prasada* grow up as a rare beauty.

> "Her golden body, red lips, face with moon-glow, had their charms. But due to the shining, dark tresses, she was fondly called Syama. The ancient saying is: the head has the pride of place".

Thus Krishnadeva Raya. There are, of course, several traditional accounts about Goda Devi's advent It is said that Vishnu-chitta had spent the prize money gained in the Pandyan court to improve his garden. One day he was digging near a *tulsi* bush. The spade (*khanitra*) touched the body of a lovely child. This happened in the year Nala on a Tuesday; the star was Pooram and it was

Ashada month, and a *chathurdasi.* It is significant that Sita Devi discovered by King Janaka while ploughing a field and Goda Devi found by Vishnuchitta when digging in a garden are both associated with Mother Earth, Bhu Devi. One of the abundant myths concerning Goda Devi has Bhu Devi asking Narayana: "My Lord, whom do you love most among human beings?" "I love all my devotees who have affection and regard for me. But those who offer me flower garlands (*poo maalai*) and verse garlands (*paa maalai*) have a special place in my heart." This set her thinking. She remembered Vishnuchitta who was making such twin-offerings to the Lord. Immediately she decided to incarnate as Goda Devi and follow the footsteps of the illustrious devotee of Srivillipputtur.

Vadivazhakiya Nambi Dasar's *Soodi-k-kodutha Nachiyar Prabhandham* poetically describes the scene when Bhu Devi appeared on the earth. Red lotuses blossomed like golden lamps, peacocks danced, bees buzzed, and the cuckoos sang a lullaby to the divine babe seen mid a sprinkle of flowers. Vishnuchitta gazes at this tender shoot of compassion (*Karunayin kozhundu*). He takes the child to the temple of Vatapatrasayi: here is a unique blossom to offer the Lord!

> "You will learn of the significance of her birth later. Take her now home and bring her up as your own daughter!"

Such was the command of the Lord issued through the priest. Vishnuchitta went home and handed over the baby to his wife Viraja Devi. They showered their love upon the child and brought her up in an atmosphere of beauty, music and piety.

The *Divyasuri Charitra* says that "Vishnuchitta foresaw that this child would speak in praise of the Lord; so he named her Goda in an auspicious moment". The word 'Goda' signifies "one who helps one's speech". It may be remembered that a poetess of the Sama Veda is known as Goda. Again, Goda means 'giver of cows', of Illuminations, a garland. Just as Vishnuchitta is known as Bhattarpiran and Perialwar, Goda Devi is also known as Āndāl (One who Rules) and *Soodi-k-kodutha-Sudarkkodi* (the flame-creeper who gave the garland worn first, *Āmukta Mālyada*). M. Raghava Iyengar, who has conducted deep research in the hymns of Goda Devi, has remarked that she must have lived in the early 8th century.

Goda Devi's hymns in the *Divya Prabhandham* are full of autobiographical intimations. Her childhood was itself a time of playful devotion to the Lord, when she and her friends built sand castles using tiny winnows, sand, water and pots:

> Noble lion who smashed the pride
> Of the elephant! One who sleeps
> On the ocean with clear waves!
> Don't you frighten us with your eyes,
> We, who loved you at first sight!
> We have sieved thin sand granules
> And built these castles with care.
> Don't you break them down!

Poets like Azhakiya Chokkanatha Pillai have written at length imaginatively about the childhood of Goda Devi. Even at a tender age the Villipputtur citizens found her unusually intelligent, a star apart:

> Aware of forms to which our eyes are closed,
> Conscious of nearnesses we cannot feel,
> The Power within her shaped her moulding sense
> In deeper figures than our surface types.
> An invisible sunlight ran within her veins
> And flooded her brain with heavenly brilliancies
> That woke a wider sight than earth could know.[1]

Krishnadeva Raya swiftly moves towards Goda Devi's youthful felicity and reserves the best flowerings of his poetic art to this phase. As the life and hymns of Goda Devi are one long passionate wait for the Lord's grace, there is a certain appositeness in the poet's choosing to limn with loving care the contours of the golden girl who is now revered as a goddess.

The twenty verses describing Goda Devi's youthful form in *Āmukta Mālyada* are a splash of colourful images, all of them related to the divine form of the Lord in some way or other. Her tresses were a mass of bright curls as if they wished to defeat by numbers the single curly Sudarshana in Narayana's hand. The dark curls dancing around her face seemed to be the writings of Brahma to

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1. *Sri Aurobindo*, Savitri (1954), p. 356.

indicate that she was endowed with the best auspicious signs among all woman kind. As her attendants raised her face to apply collyrium to her eyes, she appeared like the moon on the fourth day of the lunar month. Indeed, was it not the moon that received its glow from her face?

Krishnadeva Raya weaves an ingenious *utpreksha alankara* with Goda Devi's face, the musk deer and the moon. This is followed by another hyperbole: the large eyes with quickening glances appeared as cupid's bow being readied for a strike. Further:

> "The eyelashes were like the chains binding an elephant from falling into a well being drunk, as the eyeballs looked intoxicated".

Poetic apostrophes have a field day upon the palm-leaves in Krishnadeva Raya's hands. Goda Devi's ears are like Lakshmi (as the word *Sri* in Telugu script has the shape of an ear); the act of putting on an ear-ring is seen in terms of the familiar idea that a brother should not see his sister's undecorated ear (Lakshmi and the moon are both ocean-born). The description that began with the tresses (this is to be *kesadi paada varnanam*) now moves to the nose which is likened to a champak blossom; the bees that get frightened by the champak's scent are again attracted by her sweet breath and take her teeth to be jasmine buds. Well, one can see the bees reflected in the teeth! Though Goda Devi's neck was fashioned like a conch by Brahma, it was constant application of sandal paste in her youth that rendered it white.

Music was evidently a major occupation for Goda Devi and her friends. The hymns composed by her are also meant to be sung and she repeatedly refers to singing in the *Tiruppavai*. In the early morning hours they go about singing the praise of the Lord (*Kesavanai paadavum, Pankaya kannanai paadelo*) to wake up one another in the Margasirsa month. The poet remembers this and gets ready a meaningful compliment: the three folds on her throat signified her ability to sing effortlessly in the three reaches of base, middle and high. Lotus stalks were her hands while her chest was like the nuptial crown tied by Cupid on the face of Rati Devi. The breasts rebelled at the control imposed by the dress and grew close to each other as the pair of chakravaka birds that had been released from Rama's curse (Rama had cursed the chakravakas in the forest

when he was undergoing the pangs of separation from Sita Devi). The line of hair from the navel to the breast had a darkling sheen and appeared like a snake moving on mountains

The folds in the navel were golden sheets. The behind, the thighs, the calves, the feet: loveliness was strewn everywhere with a prodigal hand. Her golden green complexion shone with a supernal beauty:

> "As she was an incarnation of Mother Earth, due to the friendships of the earlier life, Nagakanyas took birth in the neighbouring houses of devotees as Maralika, Ekavali, Harini, Manojna and Sragvini. Together they celebrated dolls' marriages quite often and sang hundreds of prayerful songs. These songs described the wedding of Lakshmi and Narayana Listening to these songs and herself taking part in the singing, due to the effect of her past lives, Goda Devi was drawn irresistibly to the nectarean stories about the Lord's several incarnations."

As mentioned earlier, Goda Devi is considered an incarnation incorporating several aspects of Sri Devi, Bhu Devi and Neela Devi. The Sri, Bhu and Neela Suktas are of special interest in this context. While Sri Devi is the image of the Lord's compassion, Bhu Devi represents prosperity that is granted to us by Narayana, and Neela Devi (or Nappinnai, as referred to by the Alwars) is the ideal of enjoyment and happiness. As the great commentator Peria Achan Pillai avers:

> "Sri Devi forgives the wrongs done by devotees; Bhu Devi sees no wrong anywhere; Neela Devi (Nappinnai) is Patience (*kshama*) incarnate. Sri Devi is the Lord's prosperity; this prosperity is caused by Bhu Devi; it is enjoyed by Neela Devi".

Goda Devi is seen as the synthesis of all these three aspects. Hence the opening verse of Vedanta Desika's *Sri Goda Stuti* reads:

> I take refuge in Goda Devi
> The wish-yielding creeper
> In the grove of Vishnuchitta's family;
> That clings to the sandalwood tree
> Of Rangaraja;
> She is lovely and incarnates

The Patience of Mother Earth
And the compassion of Mahalakshmi.
I seek no other refuge.

Goda Devi's re-creation of Gokula in the *Tiruppavai* is an indication of all that is spoken in Bhu Sukta. Prime importance is given to rain and cows, both of which are associated with plenty since Vedic times. Bhu Devi is Vasundhara (carrying precious stones), Vasavi (image of corn) and Sadana (residence for all beings) who wears the garment of ocean (Samudravati) and has the Sun as the saffron-mark (Savitri).

The brief Neela Sukta names her Ghrutavati (maker of ghee) and Payasvati (maker of milk). She is Aghora (cool, gentle), Asha (guardian) and is ever associated with happiness for she walks in beauty. As the milk and ghee give pleasure for our body, Neela Devi's beauty gives joy for our soul. Looking at her, a figure of infinite beauty and compassion and patience, our sorrows are destroyed. A strange ecstasy thrills through our being and we *feel* a closeness to the Divine. Even as Goda Devi has described Neela Devi (Nappinnai) as a ravishing beauty (such a divine cool figure that flowers don't fade when worn on her tresses throughout the night—*kothalar poonkuzhal Nappinnai*), Krishnadeva Raya has described Goda Devi's beauty with infinite aesthetic joy. Because she *is*, "we draw nearer to God".

As we walk into the central area of this glorious theme, a rich mythological and legendary feast is laid before us. Krishnadeva Raya, who inaugurated a Hindu renaissance in South India, gives us rich glimpses of our Arya Sampath. The immediate context is Goda Devi's entry into the portals of the Palace of Divine Love:

> "Vishnuchitta, though grown prosperous due to the grace of the Lord, continued to perform his pushpa kainkaryam to the temple. He spent the rest of his time explicating the Vishnu Purana to his devotees".

The maiden's consciousness, imbibing the figure of Krishna and watching the lovely garlands being offered to Him, was fixed upon the loveliness of the fresh flowers. Attracted by them and wishing to decorate herself, she began wearing the garlands and

ornamenting her tresses with some of them. For a while she would watch her reflection in the waters of the lake. Satisfied, she would then replace the garlands in Vishnuchitta's basket.

It is not surprising that this 'misdemeanour' went undiscovered for quite some time, though Vishnuchitta was an expert garland-maker and would have noted any disturbance or crumpling up of the blossoms. Since Goda Devi was no ordinary human being but an incarnation of Nappinnai, flowers did not fade when worn by her.

So the drama goes on in *Āmukta Mālyada*. Goda Devi bathes after rubbing turmeric all over her body. She wears washed clothes, and decorates herself with Kasturi paste. Then she puts on the garlands prepared for Vatapatrasayi. Taking them off after a while she sighs deeply and tells her friends plaintively:

> "My friends! I wonder at your songs praising Hari's deeds. Which girl who has fallen in love with Him has been saved by Krishna? Better He is incarnate in every yuga as a fish, a tortoise, a boar and a lion than take a human form as Vamana, Parasurama, Rama, and Buddha and torture innocent women. There were no women during the other incarnations. Even if there were, the natural enmity between humans and animals would have kept them apart. This (problem of falling in love with the Divine) would not have occurred."

And she continues:

> "It is no untruth that the creation is one's personal handiwork. After all, we can lessen somewhat the pangs of separation by conversation with the like-minded, and music and dance. What can the poor animals do, for they cannot even talk!
>
> In the ages past this same Srihari had made his beloved gopikas shed tears and suffer tingling of the skin due to intense emotion. This was truly a sin. He had to suffer the effects of these sins by moving in waters (as fish and tortoise) and going about with stiff bristles (as a boar and a lion). As for his activities as Vamana, Parasurama and Rama, giving endless pain to women, O friends, hear me speak.

Remember Vishnu cutting off the head of Bhrigu's wife? He incarnates as Vamana and proclaims he is Brahmacharin, leaving behind beloved Lakshmi Devi, who never likes to be away from Her Lord".

And now an epic simile which compares Parasurama destroying the Kshatriya Kings several times over and doing *tarpana* in their blood to the playing of a lute in all the three reaches and using the seven swaras several times over leading to enjoyment (*anurakti*). Parasurama's giving away the earth as charity to Sage Kasyapa was a blot upon his honour. Fortunately, Bhu Devi being a *pativrata,* preferred to be born as Kasyapa's daughter and became famous as Kasyapi.

Krishnadeva Raya continues with his archful *ninda stuti.* As Rama, Vishnu had spurned Sridevi, another lady, Surpanakha, lost her nose and ears because of her love for him. If only Rama had agreed to wed her, Surpanakha's brother Ravana would not have stolen Sita, thereby condemning her to a long separation. Or he should at least have sent Surpanakha away expressing his inability to marry her. Why make fun of her and disfigure her, and thus heap additional shame upon her?

Of course we have heard of the sublime beauty of the Rama incarnation. Even men fell in love with him (*pumsam mohana roopaaya*). When the sages fell in love with him, he could easily have converted them into women and satisfied their longing. After all, he could convert even a piece of stone into the lovely damsel Ahalya. Instead, Rama went out of the way to promise the sages that in some distant future he would incarnate again and then marry them. They had to wait for a yuga for this to happen. How long the suffering!

Having been born as gopikas, one would have thought that their long wait would be rewarded by a prolonged union with the Supreme Lord. But no! The hard-hearted Lord must needs make Akrura come to take Him away to Mathura. Did these ladies meet Krishna again? Certainly not. They had to spend the rest of their lives away from their beloved who had become a royal personage in a distant city. Does this not prove that Hari is ever heartless towards ladies?

Ajomukhi and Surpanakha were disfigured because they were women. And ugly as well. Remember how, as Balarama, the Lord married Revati who was tall beyond human reach? When he wanted he could easily transform the hunchback Trivakra into a lovely damsel. Which goes to prove that there is little logic and plenty of whimsicality on the part of the Lord when it is a matter concerning women.

As we now read these passages in *Āmukta Mālyada*, we can easily visualise the intense maiden Goda Devi, her eyes flashing angrily at some distant object, lips a quiver, speaking to her friends in a plaintive tone, her hands unconsciously plucking at the fresh garland of red roses in her hand.

The passages in *Āmukta Mālyada* which form an archful *nindā stuti* criticising the Lord for His harsh treatment of ladies are eloquent testimony to Krishnadeva Raya's close acquaintance with the hymns of the *Divya Prabhandham*. For instance, the poetic prosecution of Rama was surely inspired by Tirumangai Alwar's *Siriya Tirumadal* which is in the form of a letter written by a lovelorn lady pining for union with the Lord.

The letter opens with a reference to Bhu Devi "who has the mountains for breasts, the ocean for garment, the Sun for the saffron-mark on the forehead, the rivers for her necklaces, the rainy clouds for her tresses and the waters beyond space as her guardian moat." This is followed by a description of the lady's dressing-up and a chance meeting with her Lord. Was it a deliberately contrived meeting on His part? From that moment the lady had become mad with love for the Divine. At last a gypsy finds out the truth. The lover is dark-hued Narayana!

The rest of the letter is a magnificent description of the several avatars with particular reference to the Rama and Krishna incarnations. How to overcome this impossible desire to possess the Divine who is apparently beyond human possession if we consider his superhuman activities? The only way is to show the world that the days to feel shy are over. Confess this desire openly and if people laugh at me, let them! Vasavadutta had done it before when she followed the fettered Vuthsa Udayan. "I too shall go where He is, to Venkata Hill, to Kanchi, to Vellarai, indeed to all the holy places

where He resides in the *archa* form. I shall walk the main streets shouting his *Sahasranāma*."

If Rukmani's letter to Krishna was the cry of the aspirant's anxiety, the *Tirumadal* of Tirumangai Alwar and the speech of Goda Devi in *Āmukta Mālyada* are the outbursts of a soul tried to the utmost. Krishnadeva Raya adds further sly barbs to the quiver when Krishna is on the dock.

> "In the Brindavan he gathered into his arms one cowherdess and condemned another to the sorrow of disappointment. His partiality towards Radha is well known. Why should he thus torture us all the time?"

Goda Devi's angry laughter did not deceive her friends. They realised that she had fallen in love with Krishna and was now immersed in His presence. However, they tried to make light of the whole affair:

> "It is common for women to criticise their lovers when the latter are far away; but as soon as the beloved returns home he is Indra and Chandra according to them. You had praised Him before. We cannot think you to be really indifferent now".

Goda Devi bit her lips and seemed to control her anger. She then began playing with the garland in her hands After some desultory conversation the friends told her that it was obvious her consciousness was full of Krishna. So hot were her sighs that the pearls of her necklace crumbled to powder. What a torture is this love for the Divine!

Krishnadeva Raya actually follows the autobiographical strain in the 143 verses that make up the *Nachiyar Tirumozhi*, where we go through all the stages of a mystic's path—aspiration, waiting, vision, dark night of the soul, longing, union—as the individual soul journeys from the human consciousness to the Divine. Goda Devi's verses reflect clearly her pure heart, her utter simplicity, her cultured upbringing, her sincere aspiration and her lovable nature.

There was the time of childhood when innocence met the Divine as a mischievous trouble-maker. She and her friends made

tiny sand castles that were broken up by Krishna in what seemed fun for him. "What fun do you get out of troubling innocent children?" asks Goda Devi. The question is no different from the one asked by elders when suffering comes upon them: "Why does He play with our lives so?" And then Goda Devi grew up, suddenly as it were, and found herself a victim of an intense thirst, the thirst to gain the nectar of Krishna's presence.

Written in the Nayaka-Nayaki bhava, Goda Devi's verses have a special edge as she was by birth a woman. There was no need for her to seek Krishna-anubhava by imposing a feminine colour upon her thoughts as Nammalwar (Parankusa Nayaki) and Tirumangai Alwar (Parakala Nayaki) had to when they sought to pour down in verse form their intense aspirations for the Divine. The first decad of *Nachiyar Tirumozhi* is itself a prayer to Kama Deva for success in her efforts. The Margasirsa *vrata* is over; during the forty days of the following Thai and Maasi months, Goda Devi has cleaned the temple of Kama, decorated it with *rangoli*, offered Datura and Palasa blossoms as also other favourites of Kama like the *makara* fish and the Yak. The year-end (Panguni month) sees her perform every worship marked by tradition at the temple of Cupid. Observing this vrata, her tresses have gone dry, lips have become pale and the skin has lost its sheen. It is time Kama helped her meet Narayana.

The rest of *Nachiyar Tirumozhi* is one long recollection of the Lord's avatars (with the Krishna incarnation in particular) and anxiety for reunion with the Divine. As the traditional accounts point out, childhood and girlhood in Vishnuchitta's household were a profound education in the itihasas and puranas which speak of the glory of the Lord. Krishnadeva Raya says that Vishnuchitta's time was spent in expounding the Vishnu Purana to his devotees. Thus it is not surprising that, for one who was brought up in such an atmosphere, devotion to Krishna became a way of life. Indeed, the passion for the Divine came upon her with such great intensity that it made Goda Devi a physical wreck almost.

The visual scene of Goda Devi's anxious wait for the Lord is made dramatic by Krishnadeva Raya when her friends take the stage. Marali tells Harini that Goda Devi's hot sighs make it impossible to apply musk on her forehead. Sragvini says that her body

is as dry as a garland of flowers thrown in the hot sun, and Goda Devi has become as light as a doll made of cork.

But Goda Devi silences them. From whence so much anxiety on their part? There really is nothing wrong with her! But, of course, she is like a piece of metal being heated in the fire (*puta paaka prakarambagu viyoga dhava durbharamu*) as she undergoes the pangs of separation. When alone, she gives expression to her sorrow, for the flute-player of Brindavan has entered her very being:

> "The left shoulder that appeared soft and gleaming like a blue lotus fresh blown, held up the makara ear-rings; the eye brow shaped as a neem leaf seemed to be a guardian to keep away the evil eye from the unequalled loveliness of the face; slightly bent lips that were a hibiscus-red; eyes long and bright that look on sweetly; music that flowed like seven floods pleasing the ladies in the seven worlds; all this, O Govinda, from you as your fingers danced upon the flute created soulful music. How have you managed to charm the Yadava maids!"

Goda Devi's identification with the gopikas of Brindavan is so complete that she finds herself back in space and time and suffers like one of the hundreds in the woods The cause of this discomfiture is Radha!

> "O Radha! like droves of deer the gopikas came braving the wrath of their in-laws, drawn by the irresistible call of Krishna's flute. Is it right for you to draw him away from the rest and enjoy his company in selfish isolation?"

In that *bhoga bhoomi* of divine love, one sight after another assaults Goda Devi. Here are the footmarks of Krishna that have pressed deep into the mud. He must have been carrying a weight, surely the weight of a gopika whom he was leading to a trysting place! These are Yadava maidens lying on the banks of Yamuna, suffering the flaming darts of love. What else can one expect on the banks of a river who also happens to be the daughter of fiery Surya and a sister of death-dealing Yama!

Goda Devi's efforts to contain the rising tides of passion by a bewitching smile do not deceive her friends. They tell her that her suffering is logical and is of a piece with her past lives. "How so?"

is her astonished query. Why do they talk as if they were sages who knew the past, the present and the future? Who was she in her life past? One of her friends replies:

> "Oh dear! Are you not the Satyabhama who was jealous because your co-wife Rukmani received the Parijatha blossoms? Did you not make a mountain out of a molehill and desire the Parijatha tree itself to be brought from the heavens and planted in your private garden?"

These words are a revelation. As the objects in a house are illumined when the lamp is lit, a new understanding comes upon Goda Devi. The days of intense love spent in the company of Krishna assault her being. Tears spring to her eyes. Her body shudders and she falls down in a swoon. Frightened at her condition, the friends blame themselves for having aided her collapse. They cool her figure by using fans sprinkled with rose water. Goda Devi opens her eyes but closes them again as if to hold on to the memory of the Lord's feet (*tan Mukunda charanaamruti nischalatan*). Opening them at last she looks at her friends and asks them who they are. "We are Naga Kanyas". Goda Devi embraces them with great love. Then she says:

> "I was indeed the beloved of Murari in that past birth. Now I am born in this Kali Yuga to undergo the tortures of separation. If my father desires to give me away in marriage to a human bridegroom, I will give up my life and reach the feet of my Lord. The very thought of separation from one's beloved should help a woman give up her life. Of such stuff are the truly chaste women".

Taken aback by the intensity of her passion, the friends calm Goda Devi. "Sri Krishna of Yadavas is now incarnated as the presiding deity of Srirangam. You should worship Vatapatrasayi here to gain Ranganatha as your consort".

Goda Devi's heart is a string of sapphires and pearls, assailed by doubts and quietened by the loving words of the friends by turns. However, as the days pass, she is increasingly victimised by the arrows of Cupid. There is now only one way out. She must come face to face with Krishna! Towards that end she decides to fix her

concentration. By worshipping Vatapatrasayi with soulful intensity she would surely gain proximity to Lord Krishna.

The 143 hymns of *Nachiyar Tirumozhi* record this phase of Goda Devi's life. She goes through the vicissitudes of desire, the 'existential shock' of meeting Him in person, the despair of rejection, and the physical and mental turmoil due to separation. There are also the tribulations of living in a society of human beings with the attendant gossip. Many of the verses that describe her long vigil are spelt out in terms of despair and hope:

Light, colour, thought, sleep—
These have left me—O ye clouds!
I shall sing Govinda's praises
And ask my soul to wait.
I rest with the golden garlands
In the garden of Narayana
Waiting; when will I hear
The sound of the Lord's conch
And the twang of the Sarnga bow?

How does one prepare oneself for a tryst with the Divine? The ancients have opened up several pathways to attain the Supreme. Of these, the path of devotion has been closest to the human heart because here an individual's entire experiential world can be turned to the wave lengths of the Universal in terms of aesthesis. There is the human psyche deep within us that responds perfectly to the call of the Spirit. A love of beauty in the universe—in terms of service, art, nature—holds the secret of Bhakti Yoga Goda Devi's pathway to the Divine was through a love of beauty in nature and art. Krishnadeva Raya brings out this in his description of Goda Devi's Bhakti Yoga:

"The lotus-faced Goda Devi woke up at dawn from her silent quietude. Along with her friends she carried a golden plate with turmeric and soap-nut powder as also other toilet preparations, freshly laundered clothes and towels to the pond behind her house. She walked to the pond in her garden reciting the *Divya Prabhandha* hymns. After her bath, she dried her body glistening with the golden colour of turmeric. Pushing her tresses to the back she drew an uprising mark of white paste and a saffron image in the shape of pumpkin seed.

She wore a white-and-ochre coloured sari and set about drying her thick tresses with scented smoke".

Goda Devi would then go to the temple carrying garlands of red lotuses and a bunch of ripe bananas. At that early hour the temple would be deserted. She would sweep the *prākāras* and draw lovely *rangoli* decorations all over the place. Pouring ghee made from the milk of a tawny cow, she would light the lamp. Reciting the *Dvaya* mantra affirming absolute self surrender, she would decorate the deity with lotus garlands, prepare aloe-wood scented smoke, and offer the sweet ripe plantains along with sugar and ghee. Pieces of betel-nut, dried ginger and camphor would be mixed by her and placed before the Lord with deep devotion. Only after making all these offerings at dawn would Goda Devi join her friends. Together they would circumambulate the sanctum sanctorum and receive the *satagopa* blessing from the priest as also the holy water (*charana teertha*). Decorating her tresses with the garland blazoning the Lord's pleasure, Goda Devi would then wend her way home.

Such was her daily routine. Back home she would once again become a prey to depression caused by the exile from the Lord's presence. To overcome this she would spend her time singing the hymns of the *Divya Prabhandham* that glorify the deeds of Krishna.

If Krishnadeva Raya gives brilliant descriptions of the summer and rainy seasons when dealing with the episodes of Vallabhadeva and Yamunacharya respectively, he excels himself in the unforgettable description of spring while delineating the life of Goda Devi. The Margasirsa month had just ended. Goda Devi had indited the *Tiruppavai* during the preceding thirty days. Makara Sankrama had taken place now, the Sun having turned towards the North. The poet archfully declares that this was because the Sun could not bear the scorching flames of separation that engulfed Goda Devi who resided in the South. The Sun raced towards the North to cool himself in the Himalayan ranges! More such conceits mark the layers of description, and the poet's powers of observation constantly jerk us into joyous recognition. Spring had come and so people had stopped wetting their lips with tongues (as the lips crack during winter); cool breeze from the South enveloped the atmosphere, as if the breeze wished to give

trees the scent of sandalwood high up in the Southern mountains; maidens gave up wearing blouses (*kuppasamulu*); the nightingales began to warble; nature put on her most colourful garments; Cupid found that his jasmine-arrows had ceased to be, but he took up the daggers of tender shoots to assault the lovers; abundant pollen poured out from a variety of blossoms filling the air with the heady scent of spring.

Various scenes of lovers' trysts dotted the countryside. The laughter of women in love had the power to make trees thrill with blossoms! The different trees remind Kirshnadeva Raya of their mythological associations with the heroes and heroines of the past. The Asoka that had been Sita Devi's retreat in Lanka is here aflame with flowers.

Vasanta Rithu, in *Āmukta Mālyada*, was the earth made a heaven. The nether worlds were filled with the honey from the spring flowers; the earth with blossoms; the skies were choked with pollen. Thus did Cupid measure the three worlds with his feet, as Madhava did in his Trivikrama incarnation, and cooled the rays of the Sun. Since the bees lay thick on the ground drinking the dripping honey from the flowers, the earth beneath the trees looked dark throughout the day irrespective of the movement of the Sun.

To overcome the assault of spring, Goda Devi began to sing the Megharanjani raga. Immediately the clouds gathered and winds blew over the flower clusters. Shuddering, she swooned. Coming to herself, she began to play the lute. But there was no peace here either.

She then began to draw the portrait of Narayana, as if she needed it for worship. Actually this action gave her a chance to watch lovingly the beloved limbs of the Lord. However, when she came to the image of Lakshmi on the Lord's breast, she grew sad due to the pangs of jealousy (*talledillu eesun taapamun meeragun*). Her friends found it impossible to bring down the fever of her desire, though they did try their best by pouring rose water on her limbs. It was only when her pet swan began spewing out the cast-off lotus garland, which it found hot, did Goda Devi smile. This smile was a source of reassurance to her friends.

So the days of spring passed by. Goda Devi sang, aspired,

wilted, suffered. The inner spaces of her being were one vast ocean of passionate yearning to meet the Divine. Her condition naturally brought on depression over her home.

Vishnuchitta's household had always been overflowing with joy, for Krishna bhakti filled the home. And Krishna is Anandamaya. The coming of Goda Devi to the household had added lustre to the joy. In Goda Devi's growing up, Vishnuchitta relived the Gokula days when Krishna had entered Nanda's household. So much loveliness, devotion, music! And suddenly everything was hushed. Goda Devi increasingly withdrew into herself and laughter fled from the home of Vishnuchitta.

He was flabbergasted. His life had always taken a calm course. The brief excitement of the Madura triumph had not affected his retired life at Villipputtur. He was a stranger to violent passion, and the condition of Goda Devi frightened him. Himself a devotee of Krishna, he decided that his daughter was undergoing a *tapas*, an askesis, a yoga for union with the Divine. As her body grew weak, Vishnuchitta's concern also increased. One day he opened his heart to the presiding deity of Villipputtur:

> "O Lord, my daughter who is devoted to you is now observing a *tapas* which is strange to behold. She is my sole life's light. I have not heard of sleepless nights when observing Narayana's festivals. We wear garlands of lotus seeds and not of lotus roots (which Goda Devi wears to cool her passion-racked body). The flowers of the Lord are worn by us on the ear and not used as a bed. We sip the *charana amrita* whereas she pours it on her body! When we take food during *vrata*, she gives up her meals. When we draw the breath in for *pranayama*, she lets out breath as hot sighs. We place our fingers near our heart in *chinmudra* but she places her fingers on her forehead (as she gets lost in thought). We use barks for a tapasvin's dress; she puts on garments woven with tender shoots. We praise the full moon but she curses it. What is this austerity that is totally different from the ones followed by us? Ignorant as I am, you will have to explain this strange *tapas* being observed by my darling daughter".

Vatapatrasayi smiled gently. How explain to Vishnuchitta the strange ways of the Divine? How bring home to him the truth

about Goda Devi's incarnation? The Lord begins to tell a story, and Krishnadeva Raya takes up the last of the digressions in *Āmukta Mālyada*.

There was once a devotee of Narayana born in the *panchama* caste who used to worship the Lord by singing the Mangala Kowsiki raga. He was an honest fellow and was very much like a jewel bound up by the dusty cloth of a 'low' caste. Twanging his lute, tears streaming down his eyes, this Mala Dasari would sing soulfully and dance in self-forgetful ecstasy, lost in the vasts of god-consciousness. After offering worship outside the temple for a long time, he would take the water that flowed out of the sanctum sanctorum when it had been washed, and drink the same as prasad. He would also be given some left-over food by a passing devotee or pedestrian.

One night a cat entered the hen-coop in his cottage and the cock crowed. Mala Dasari mistook the call and decided that dawn had come near. He got up and proceeded towards the temple to perform his worship. He crossed the fields and entered a deserted path on his way. Here stretched uncultivated fields where many a vicious animal had prepared its lair. Alas, it was night still and he had lost his way. He entered a forest where a big banyan tree confronted him. Skulls, hair and dried pieces of flesh lay strewn all over the place presenting a dreadful sight.

Now appeared before him a dire apparition, a Brahmarakshas. Wearing a corpse as an undergarment, dread-faced, the spirit had elephantine legs and a pot-head. "Move not, you have been discovered", roared the spirit. Presently the Brahmarakshas and his demon-wife caught hold of the devotee who, however, did not forget the name of the Lord. The two strove for a while. The Brahmarakshas said:

> "The fat of your body pleases my desire. I would drink your blood with red meat, sharing it with this demoness. My appetiser would be wine filled in these skulls! You gave me quite a bit of trouble. I will not kill you the easy way."

The Mala Dasari spoke gentle words of good import (*dharmamu eriginchu sooktin*):

> "O demon, even gods cannot defeat you. I am indeed food that has reached your plate. Don't get angry. After all, I

have no attachment to my body either. It is best I am rid of this chandala form. To see heavens at close range is a happy thought. Our good example is Emperor Sibi who exchanged his body for Moksha Is it not better to die for satisfying the pangs of hunger of a fellow-being than be killed in an accident or by sickness?"

Then the devotee proceeded to speak words of deep wisdom. After all a Brahmarakshas is high-born and can think like humans. What price murder! Indeed, what is the use of sustaining one's body through killing others? Demons like Ravana and Hiranyakasipu had to go the way of all flesh. Yama takes charge of torturing humans and demons alike, to match the sinful deeds perpetrated by them on the earth. And our deeds are regulated by *sattva, rajas* and *tamas* within us; these again are conditioned by the kind of food we eat. The gods live long happily because they eat the offerings poured into the fire of holy yajnas. One could go on describing the importance of our gods and goddesses.

The demon laughed: "Don't talk to me of Vedas and Shastras! Fie upon your old wives' tales! I am going to kill you!"

Mala Dasari changed the track of his speech and decided to make one more attempt to persuade the Brahmarakshas to give him a last chance to worship the Lord with his favourite raga.

The original tale of Mala Dasari occurs in the Varaha Purana. Krishnadeva Raya has introduced a few changes to suit his plan of expounding Visishtadvaita. Indeed, we soon forget that the episode is a digression and we have been detained at an important point in the tale of Goda Devi. Such is the power of the Raya's sublime poetry.

When shastraic lore failed to convince the demon, Mala Dasari said that having spent some time conversing under the aswatha tree, a fraternal bond had been forged between the two. Hence the demon should have some pity for the Dasari's desire to fulfil a vow. Nearby was the temple of Kurungudi. He would go there, fulfil his vow of offering musical worship and return to the demon to be eaten. Because of the worship, the Dasari's body would have become *prasada*. Surely such holy food would be welcomed by the Brahmarakshas!

The dread spirit smiled and touched the Dasari lightly on the cheek. The fellow was pretty clever! Fancy a land where one fellow would give up the food that has fallen to his portion or another who would give up his life to keep a word! No, he would not be diddled out of his juicy dinner.

"Narayana! Narayana!" recited the Dasari and made several promises. Finally, the musician said very much in the style of Pothana's Gajendra:

> "From whom is this universe formed? In whom does it stay? In whom does it end? It is Vishnu. Should I break my promise, may the sin of having worshipped a God other than Vishnu be mine!"

The Brahmarakshas now released the Dasari who went to the temple and sang the glories of Lord Narayana in the Mangala Kowsiki raga. Returning to the forest he called out:

> "O demon! I have come here having rid myself of all desires by worshipping the Lord. Also I have returned with all my limbs intact. Check for yourself!"

The power of Truth is immeasurable. The Brahmarakshas was taken aback. Huge and repulsive, he approached the Dasari, circumambulated him with great humility and prostrated before him. "In this wide world, among gods, demons and kings, there is none as truthful as you are. This truth is scripture. There is none equal to you. You have been swimming in the floods of music with the help of your lute's calabash shell. You have received the grace of Lord Nambi, the presiding deity of Kurungudi. You have heroism, knowledge, truth, devotion to the Lord. Who can equal you?"

The Dasari embraced the demon with love. After all, the greater was the demon's sacrifice in voluntarily giving up his prey! Was it not this which enabled the Dasari to complete his vow? Now Dasari is here to be eaten. "I call upon the Lord to be witness to my sincere self-offering!"

The Brahmarakshas shuddered.

"How can you be so pitiless? I have sustained this repulsive body with human flesh all these days. Long has been my wait

for that person who is pure of heart and habit and who alone can save me from this hateful life. If sincere devotees like you cannot come forward to help the like of us, where then is hope for me? People like you can save us just as the Philosopher's Stone transforms iron into gold".

Then he told the Dasari how he had been condemned to be a sinful demon. If the Dasari could give him the fruits of his musical worship of the Divine, the demon would be freed from the curse. But the Dasari would not part with his good deed. Giving up the fruits of Vishnu bhakti for saving one's skin was like exchanging camphor for salt. "Not even half of the fruits? Does the sea-water grow less because the fish drinks it?" The demon appealed to the Dasari's pity.

How can a devotee of Narayana be so hard-hearted? There was Ramanuja who braved the fires of hell and the wrath of his guru to be able to teach the common humanity the Great Truth. He had got up the spire of the temple and blazoned forth the Tirumantra, the Dvaya and the Charama sloka. It was this great teacher who had converted ignorant followers of non-Vedic religions at Tirunarayanapuram to Vaishnavism. He had travelled all over areas like Andhra Pradesh and taught people to revere Vishnu. Donning the ochre robe Ramanuja had illumined the spaces of philosophy, cleared the shadows within the human psyche and disseminated the message of Narayana-bhakti. Again, there was Vedanta Desika, an unswerving devotee of Lord Hayagriva. This teacher had lived a frugal life and written scores of volumes to proclaim the supremacy of Narayana. Our gratitude towards such path-finders should ever be acknowledged. The Dasari too should follow the steps of such great people. Death would not bring relief to the Brahmarakshas. One must attack the roots of his malady. Even a quarter of the fruits of singing the Mangala Kowsiki raga would yet save him.

The Dasari's heart overflowed with compassion. The Brahmarakshas related his tale with humility. He had been a learned Brahmin in the Chola land. But pride of scholarship had been his weakness. Gradually he became a trickster. At Madura he got mixed up with Brahmins who sold their traditional calling for money. By lending, he became very rich. One day he took a fresh oil-bath,

decorated himself and went on a journey. On the way he was murdered by highway robbers. His last moments were shadowed by the awe-inspiring form of Kakasmasru, one of the robbers. He became a Brahmarakshas haunting the aswatha tree.

The Dasari said that it was self-defeating to think that the fruits of serving the Lord could be divided. The Lord alone knows how to weigh the worth of devotion: "May He save the unfortunate!" Even before the words were out of his mouth, a brilliant form of a Brahmin came out of the demon, like a flame out of clouds of smoke. Carrying a *Divya Prabhandham*, the Brahmin worshipped the Dasari with choice words describing *bhagavata lakshana* and proceeded to Badrikasharama to end his days meditating upon the blissful form of Narayana.

Now back to the *sannidhi* of Vatapatrasayi at Srivillipputtur. In the Varaha Purana, Vishnu had recounted the tale of the Mala Dasari to Bhu Devi. She decided to please the Lord by incarnating on earth and offering *gaana anjali* to Him. So she was born as Goda Devi, and was now worshipping the Lord with poetry and music. Having enlightened Vishnuchitta thus, Vatapatrasayi asked his devotee to take Goda Devi to Srirangam. Accordingly, the great Alwar went to the holy city, accompanied by Goda Devi, in a golden palanquin.

Srirangam was (and is) a Vaikuntha on earth. Its golden spires appeared like champak blossoms that repelled the bees (sins). The river Kaveri by its beauty, sweetness and cool waters gave rest to the travel-weary Vishnuchitta. He bathed in the river reciting the appropriate prayers to the Sun. He then proceeded towards the temple with groups of devotees, and also his daughter, who looked lovely with beautiful ornaments.

Krishnadeva Raya's Srirangam is a place prosperous beyond one's imagination. But there is no greed anywhere, and in fact people vie with one another in their allergy to money. In each house varied kinds of sweets are cooked as prasada for the household deity (*prati grihasartha bhakshyapu valpuna*), but the devotee who takes to *unchavritti* accepts only paddy. The doorways to the prakara were ever crowded with gods seeking admission. Presiding over the guards was Vishwaksena holding the whip. And Garuda stood there with folded hands.

After being announced by Garuda, Vishnuchitta entered Ranganatha's presence. The sight that greeted him is vividly evoked in one long breathless sentence by Krishnadeva Raya. Nammalwar and other devotees; Ranganatha reclining on Adi-sesha; brilliances everywhere that destroy the sorrows in a devotee's heart (*bhakta jana manah tamah vidalanambun kavinchuchun*); in short, Sri Vaikuntha on earth. Vishnuchitta bowed deep to this Lord of lords who alone could release us from the three passions (*taapah traya*), this Narayana the Ancient, the Best among men, Prana-taarthihara, Vasudeva, Hrishikesa, Creator of Cupid, the King of Srirangam. An incandescent prayer blossomed forth from him:

I bow to you who are the wealth
Indestructible in Brahma's home;
My homage to you who was worshipped
By the Ikshvaku dynasty;
All hail to you, the family deity
In the home of Vibhishana;
You lead the hosts of gods
Including the powerful Siva.

Ranganatha is the throne-of-all, source-of-all; He is the Lord of all creation, and yet resides within us as well, and pervades the tiniest atom imaginable; He is the source of Light and Knowledge; the *jivatman* is dependent upon Him, but He is transcendent and beyond the dust of creation: the First, the Pure, the Power that moves Time: unperceivable by human senses, He is yet our only refuge.

Vishnuchitta's prayer brought out the *prana svarupa* as well as the lovely *archa* figure of Ranganatha. The Lord looked at his devotee with love and compassion and enquired about his well-being. He then glanced at the lovely, youthful form of Āmukta Mālyada who was offering flowers at His feet with meditative surrender, and thought for Himself:

"The eyes of this girl must have given Cupid his flag (which has a fish on it); her middle is so thin like a flower-creeper and must have given Vasantha his residence (spring is famous for its spreading creepers); her breasts no doubt gave Rati the image of calabash for her lute; her lotus-face certainly offered the resting-place for Saraswati's swan (which is sup-

posed to live in the lotus); her thick tresses have certainly brought joy to the peacock (which dances when the rain clouds gather); her lotus-feet have become the refuge of bees".

The Divine's ways are inexplicable. In a moment Goda Devi had been taken inside the inner apartments of the Lord; and a deceptive figure like hers was left near Vishnuchitta. Vishnuchitta received temple honours and returned home with the surrogate figure (*sambari tanu sambahavam*) in the palanquin. However, when they reached home, the figure of Goda Devi vanished. Returning to the temple, Vishnuchitta cried out:

> "Alas! Inspite of being the guardian-lord, Ranganatha has stolen my daughter. Who will come to my aid in relieving me of this wrong? If he had fallen in love with her, I would myself have arranged the marriage. My body and my earnings are meant for Him. Goda Devi is no exception. Why then should He belittle me so? Just because He is worshipped by mighty powers like Shiva, Brahma and Indra, He should not insult poor people like me. Lakshmi Devi is my witness. May Vaishnavas speak on my behalf! With Sri, Bhu and Neela beside you, why have you sought to take away this girl grown wafer-thin because of severe penance? Who can correct the zig-zag course of rivers and the path of water-ways?"

Ranganatha was seemingly taken aback by Vishnuchitta's passion. A smile lighting up the makara-earrings, the Lord said that Vishnuchitta had certainly grown senile. Goda Devi was safe in Vishnuchitta's house! He must go back and search the place well. Going back, the Villipputtur Brahmin found his daughter safe. Tears streaming down his eyes, he blessed her.

Meanwhile Ranganatha sent Brahma, Rudra, Saraswati and Parvati, along with Vishwaksena, to Vishnuchitta with a formal proposal for Goda Devi's hand. Vishnuchitta was delighted, but would agree to the marriage only if Ranganatha assented to getting married in Villipputtur. That way, he would be honoured by the whole community. The message was communicated to Ranganatha. The Lord agreed. Vishnuchitta returned to Villipputtur with Goda Devi.

Villipputtur put on a festival look for the approaching Goda Kalyanam. Vishnuchitta's home built by Viswakarma was decorated with festoons. Ranganatha came riding the Garuda, and was

accompanied by his divine retinue. He had a ceremonial bath and was decked up with ornaments. The drums beyond resounded and divine sages like Narada recited auspicious verses. Nectar poured from the silver sky drenching the Lord. Wearing the Kausthubha gem and other strings of pearls, and decked out in all finery, Ranganatha the bridegroom (*Pendli koduku*) came sporting garlands of *tulsi* and fresh blossoms.

Saraswati and Parvati sang wedding songs relating to the marriage of Rama and Sita aeons before. Ekavali and Sragvini fanned the bride who was given a ceremonial bath by the wives of the sages. Scented oil was rubbed on her limbs. Goda Devi was dressed in soft silk and her tresses were gently dried with scented smoke. One divine damsel put rings upon the bride's toes. Another added silver anklets. White silk with woven zari border was used as the bridal dress. Among ornaments used to decorate the bride were a golden belt, pearl necklaces, bangles, shoulder clips, ear-rings, ear-studs and nose-rings. Collyrium was applied to her eyes, musk rubbed on her limbs, the *choodamani* placed on her head and red lotuses tied to her tresses.

The auspicious moment had come. The twelve Adityas glowed as torches, the moon was the umbrella with stars as decorative pearls, the ocean sprinkled lotus petals on the road, Mother Nature with divine damsels added elegance to the scene, Agni raised scented smoke, the God of Rain raised the bridal canopy, scholars recited the Vedas, singers sent abroad waves of soulful music, Garuda carried a golden plate heaped with jewels: and the Divine Bridegroom (Alagiya Manavālan, Mannaru) entered the marriage pandal.

He was received by Vishnuchitta with devotional salutations (*bhakti kalita bahupranaamapoorvakambugan*) while ladies with auspicious signs washed His feet. The Lord was seated upon a golden stool while His feet were held on a golden plate and washed by Vishnuchitta. Due honours were done. Then the devotee offered *madhuparka* (bridal garments) to the Divine bridegroom. Vishnuchitta and his wife performed *kanya daana*, and Lord Ranganatha received gladly Goda Devi. A white screen with pearl border was held between the bride and the groom. At the moment of auspicious union they offered each other jaggery and jeera seeds (*gudajeerakambulu*), and the screen was removed. Ranganatha poured

pearls on Goda Devi and she reciprocated the gesture. The Lord was thrilled and sweat poured from His body. It appeared as if the dark clouds were sending forth rain and hail-stones at the same time.

Goda Devi grew shy at the Lord's watching her. Bowing her head, she sprinkled the pearls with a short and quick gesture. The Lord tied the auspicious thread (*mangala sootramu*) around the neck of Goda Devi. Laaja Homa was followed by Sapthapadi (seven steps together) and the watching of the Arundhati star. The Lord received presents from the assembled gods and sent them away after according them proper honours. Later he went to his native city and disported with Goda Devi in the sandal-scented gardens of Srirangam. Full of compassion, He and Goda Devi guard the devotees all the time.

Thus concludes Krishnadeva Raya's *Āmukta Mālyada*. Goda Devi herself has described in *Nāchiyar Tirumozhi* her dream in which she married Ranganatha. This has inspired generations of poets to dwell upon the theme, and transform the dream into reality in terms of poetry and music. It has been a fond tradition with Vaishnavites to celebrate this wedding every year on the day preceding Sankranti:

A thousand elephants marching
About, my Lord Narayana
Walks towards me; golden pots
Brimful decorate the doorways;
Festoons everywhere. This my dream.
Vedic scholars recited hymns
And spread holy grass emerald-green,
Around the sacred fire;
My Lord like a proud elephant
Held my hand as we circumambulated
Agni: This my dream.

The symbol of a wedding is vital to the spiritual history of mankind. The *jivatman* should be ever ready, decked out in the ornaments of good qualities, faith and surrender, like a bride. For any moment the Bridegroom, the Universal Supreme, may arrive and gather the *jivatman* in one sweep of bliss. The Nāyaka-Nāyaki bhava used in devotional literature has grown out of this basic

symbol to suggest the readiness of the human vessel to receive the Divine Afflatus. Artists and poets have lavished their imagination fondly on this union of the human and the divine in a blaze of spiritual ecstasy. The *Divya Prabhandham* has some unique sections that bring out the best of this *bhava,* as in Tirumangai Alwar's *Peria Tirumadal* and Nammalwar's *Tiruviruttam.*

Celebrating *Goda Kalyanam* in the images stationed in temples or in poetry as in *Āmukta Mālyada* assures us that an answering grace will meet our one-pointed aspiration leading to a spiritual union. Again, celebrating the *kalyana* of Ranganatha with Goda Devi ensures *loka kalyana,* the good of the world. The divine union symbolises the coming together of Power and Compassion or Grace in the adventure of human consciousness to reach the Divine. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the Andhra Vishnu commanded the King on a battle trail to get involved with the story of Goda Kalyanam. The sublime Telugu accents in *Āmukta Mālyada* form the real victory for Emperor Krishnadeva Raya who reenacted in his evocative poesy the drama divine:

The wedding of the eternal Lord and Spouse
Took place again on earth in human forms:
In a new act of the drama of the world
The united Two began a greater age.[1]

1 *Sri Aurobindo,* Savitri, 1954 edition, p 465.

APPENDIX

GODA DEVI: A LYRIC DAWN

I

The time had come
for the spread of a new idea-force
that would thrill human existence
with the lyric dawn
of a spiritual Sunrise.

As Vishnuchitta bent low
for the scented leaves of Tulsi
in his well-tended garden
in Villipputtūr on hallowed ground,
he saw a moon-lit babe new-born,
sweet featured, soft, auspicious,
smiling mid the basil-bush.

It seemed natural, the sight
of that living icon in his garden.
Dare we question the ways
of Providence to reach out far
and respond to the aspiring soul?

Vishnuchitta took the baby home,
and Viraja felt transported.
They named her Goda of wondrous tresses,
A Vedic Hymn in human form.

II

Goda's years of childhood and girlhood
were one long tune of bliss-consciousness.
Hers was a home where Father's rhapsodies
envisioned Krishna's childhood and boyhood,
and she too learned to sing, dance, praise.
weave exquisite flower-garlands,
and presently lisp in numbers
and re-live radiant Krishna's feats.

When Vishnuchitta sees maiden Goda
beautify herself with Krishna's garlands,
He has a father's joy of fulfilment:
"How well they suit her ..
but this is truly a flame-born bride!"
He tells her admonishingly: "But child,
you shouldn't wear the garland first."

"Why not?" the words leap out of her lips:
"Isn't Krishna mine, mine?"
"True, my child, yet there's custom, law..."
"Change them, then !"
Krishna smiles and abides by her wish:
"Let Goda wear the garlands first,
then offer them to me!"
Amazed Vishnuchitta bows in his dream
before the blinding Glory.

Strange the rites of self-consecration:
seeking Krishna, who had accepted
the champak-jasmine-bakul ensembles
that carried the scent of her tresses,
Vishnuchitta's beloved daughter
is certain of her destiny:

"With him, with Krishna, I breathe;
without him, I cannot exist!"

III

Meet him she must, but how? Will he come?
Didn't he give the slip to the Vraja girls?
But he responded to Rukmani's call,
and he'll not fail me either:
isn't he Nandagopa's darling son,
the flute-player of Brindavan,
the indwelling universal,
the life-throb in all creation:
he'll not fail me, my lord Kirshna!

Yea, how shall I seek him?
He's the Lord supreme of all the worlds;
I'm no Garuda to reach him
in a heady canter...
Four his powers and manifestations,
yet they elude my human grasp.
Isn't he the king of the Castle within,
the Antaryāmi in my heart's cave?
I cannot dig so deep, I'm human,
and want him human too.
This is no age for an *avatar*,
but in his auspicious *archa* form
I will certainly be his bride.

Now commence Goda's austerities:
the month of godliness, Mārgasīrsa,
finds her engaged in askesis
along with other Vraja maidens:

body, life-force, mind, feeling, will, soul,
all are surrendered to the Lord Divine.
A new light lit in her consciousness,
Goda plunges into the deeps of devotion
and makes herself God's true serviteur.

The cold days swiftly pass by
in music, dance, meditation and prayer.
She visits the Temple of Kāma
and with *datura* and *palasa* invokes
the elusive God of Love.
She begs the *kuyil* and the parrot,
other birds, flowers, and even the cloud,
to convey her message to Krishna.
As she feels self-lost remembering
how Krishna sang his way to Brindavan,
the Vision grows clear, she has seen:
she has seen the Lord in Brindavan.

IV

Holding the dear image in her heart,
her ardour giving her wings of flight,
Goda journeys to distant lands
in search of the Lord of her being.

Single-pointed her action,
and a frenzy of consecration:
but where is Krishna, where his ready Grace?
Vishnuchitta accompanies her
as she goes the round of shrines,
and seeks remedies for his ailing child!

As the two walk at last the foot-path way
mid the fields of waving paddy golden-sheened,
the spires of Srirangam beckon to them,
and they enter the sacred city.

Isn't this holy spread on earth
a twin of the celestial world above?
Isn't this picturesque island formed
by the parted waters of Kaveri?
Isn't this marvellous corner Nature-blest
chosen by the cosmic Spirit
for his ineluctable Yogic trance?
Isn't this the refuge of the struggling soul
that has seen aeons of births and sorrows?
Isn't this the centre of earth-existence
for the soul caught in the noose of Bhakti?
Isn't this the elected sanctuary,
for Goda Devi's Tryst with the Divine?

V

As Vishnuchitta leads his wonder-child
towards the eternal Bridegroom,
the sum of all auspicious attributes,
Goda becomes Krishnachitta.
Her being plunges into an ocean of bliss.
Whither has reason gone? Has her ego
raced to the abyss of nothingness?
Has she still a body? Isn't she all-soul now?
And isn't this Soul the Truth of Truths?
a power of all-consciousness, all-joy?
Ah how explain this Delight of Existence!
this all-beautiful, all-blissful?

Yea, this is the moment in human time
that cuts across timeless time:
this is the movement is terrestrial terms
that alchemises earth-clay into divine Light.
This is the journey's end for those
who choose the path of Divine Life.

The Lord smiles as Goda gets merged in him:
ah whither has gone the bright young bride?
Vishnuchitta grasps the secret
of the wedding of the Lord and his Spouse,
comprehending the eternities.
For the present, the colour, joy and the smile;
For all future time, Truth's self-delight.
Ah, infinite Lover! compassionate Lord!
Was it to make us see and sing
this symphony of divine Delight
grown native on our beautiful earth,
you missioned your consort Vasundhara
to take a human birth as Goda
in Villipputtur, in Pandyan land?